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NATURE, CATTLE THIEVES AND VARIOUS OTHER  
MIDNIGHT ROBBERS

Images of People, Place and Landscape  
in Damaraland, Namibia

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Richard Frederick Rohde

PhD

University of Edinburgh

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## A NOTE ON DAMARA - NAMA ORTHOGRAPHY

Standard Damara-Nama orthography recognises the following signs to designate 'clicks':

/ Dental or alveolar affricate.

ʄ Alveolar stop.

//Lateral affricate.

! Palatal or retroflexive stop.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a study of the social-economy of pastoralism in Damaraland, a former homeland of Namibia. It focuses on communal livestock farmers and their families, their strategies for coping with drought, poverty and a legacy of political oppression. By combining ethnographic, historical and ecological research methods the author achieves a multi-faceted view of pastoral practice in relation to land tenure, environmental change, political history and rural development.

As part of a wider critique relating to past ethnographic representations of Namibians, the author presents a collection of over 200 photographs made by sixteen individual 'informants' from his central fieldwork area of Okombahe. These photographs form the basis for a discussion of identity, social relations, mobility, reciprocity, poverty and politics in rural Damaraland as well as theoretical considerations pertaining to visual representation generally. This ethnographic material is contextualized by exploring the historical experience of the inhabitants of Okombahe in relation regional economic, social and political processes.

In order to survive in this unpredictable arid environment, communal livestock farmers, practice an opportunistic strategy of coping with drought based on flexible property relations. This thesis researches the impact which pastoral practice and communal settlement has had on this environment. The history of vegetation change in the vicinity of communal settlements in Damaraland is explored using a combination of methodologies including matched ground and aerial photography. The author concludes that this research validates recently revised theories pertaining to dryland ecology which posit that such environments are highly resilient: vegetation change associated with communal land use in Damaraland has come about primarily as a result of long term climatic fluctuations rather than because of unsustainable exploitation by communal farmers. This is shown to have important implications for contemporary development policy.

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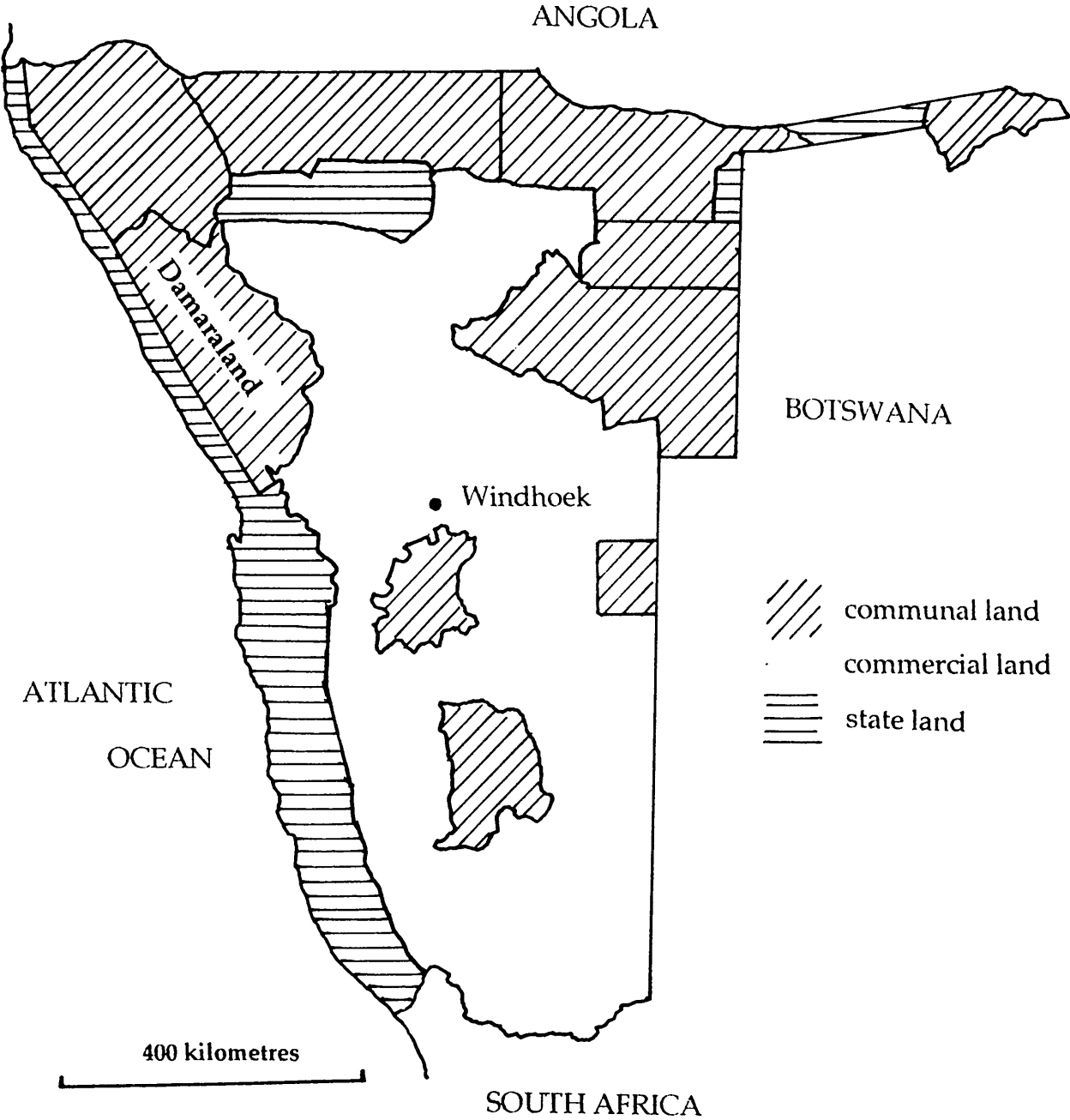
James Suzman, my mentor, younger brother and fellow initiate kept me from growing old during what seemed like a life-time of writing-up.

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Finally, without the insight, support and fortitude of Hillary, this project would have remained an unfathomed dream.

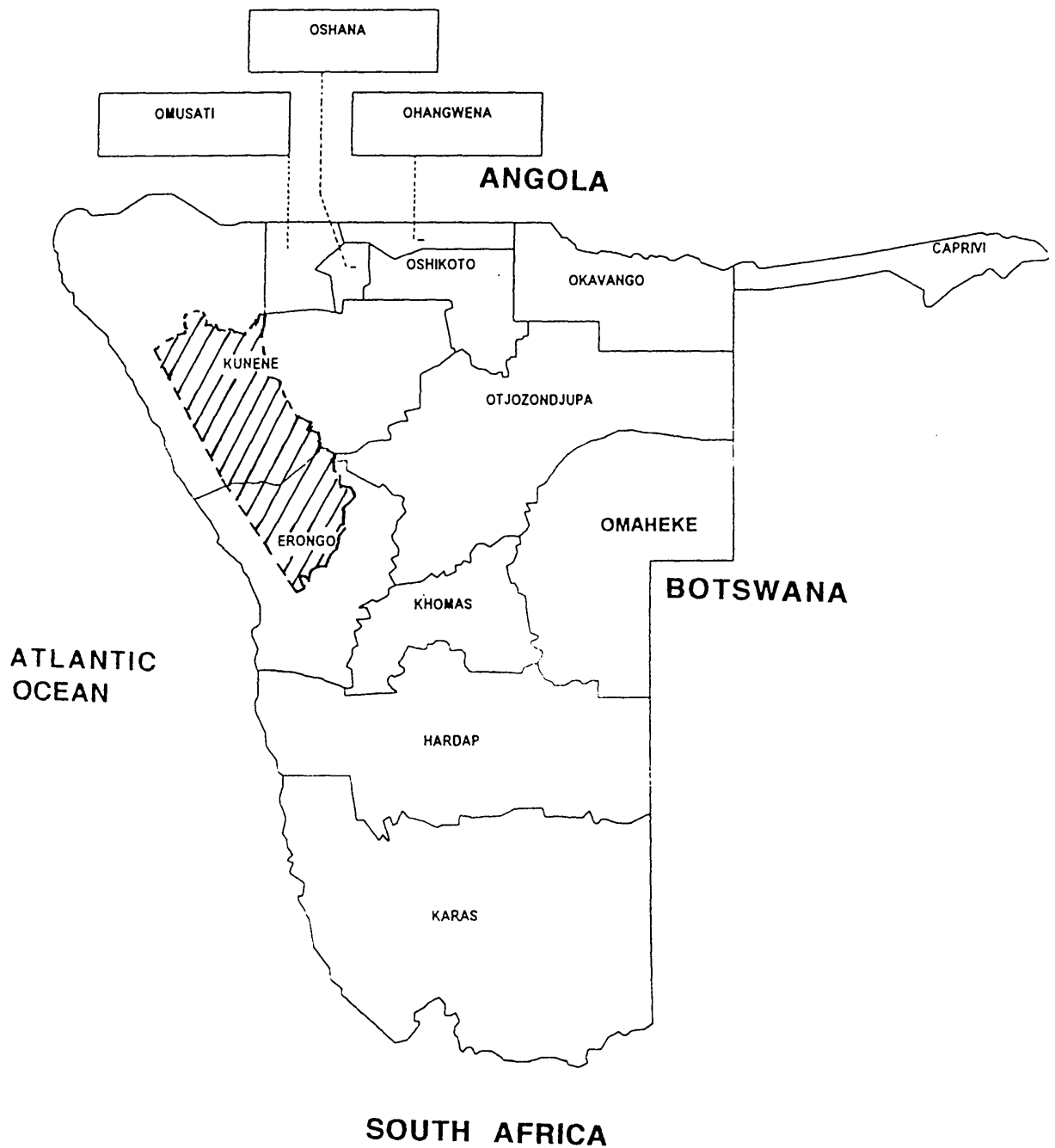
**This thesis is dedicated to Hillary and Zoë Rohde.**

MAP # 1A - NAMIBIA: ADMINISTRATIVE BOUNDARIES  
Homelands circa 1970



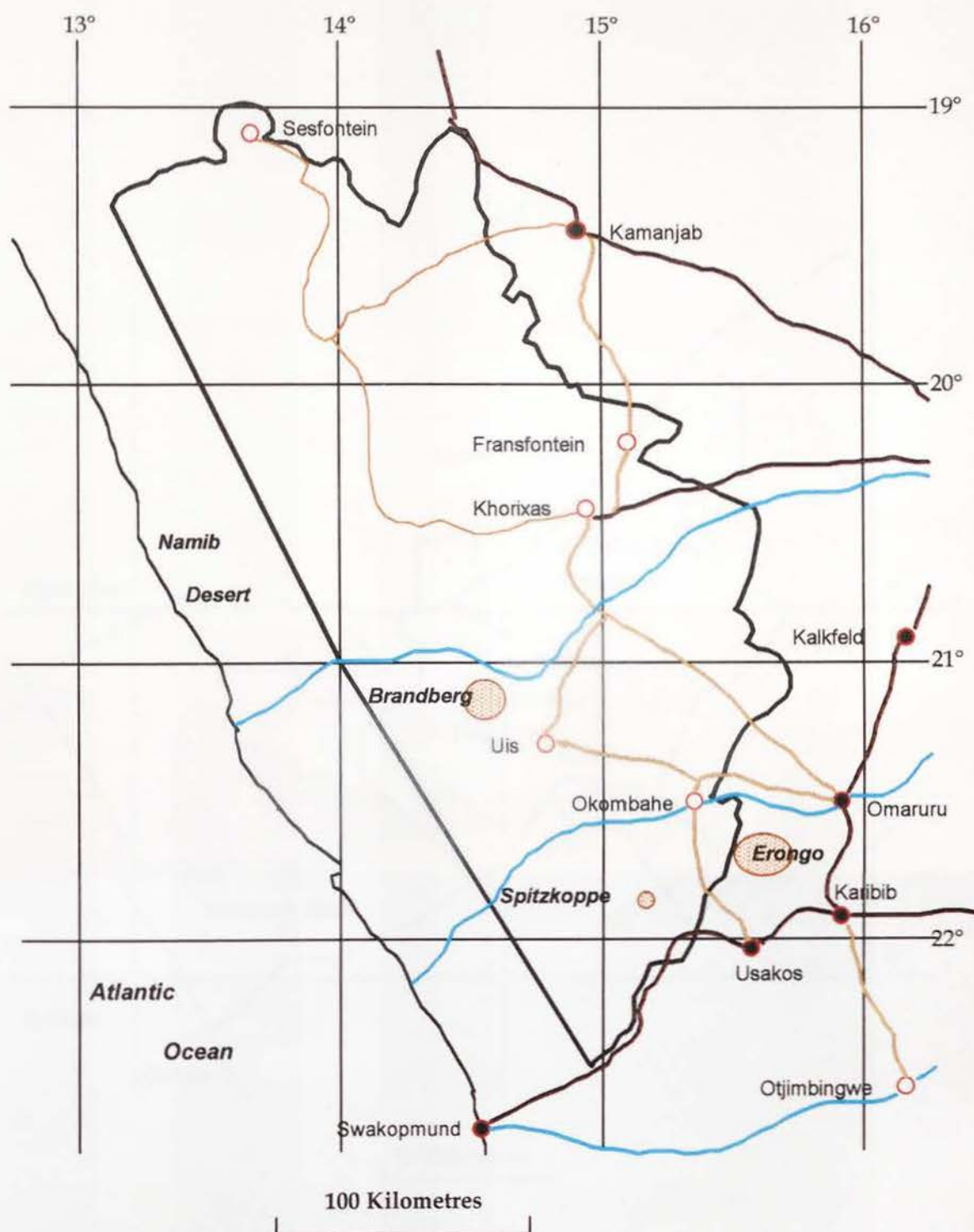


**MAP # 1B - NAMIBIA: ADMINISTRATIVE BOUNDARIES**  
**Regions 1992**



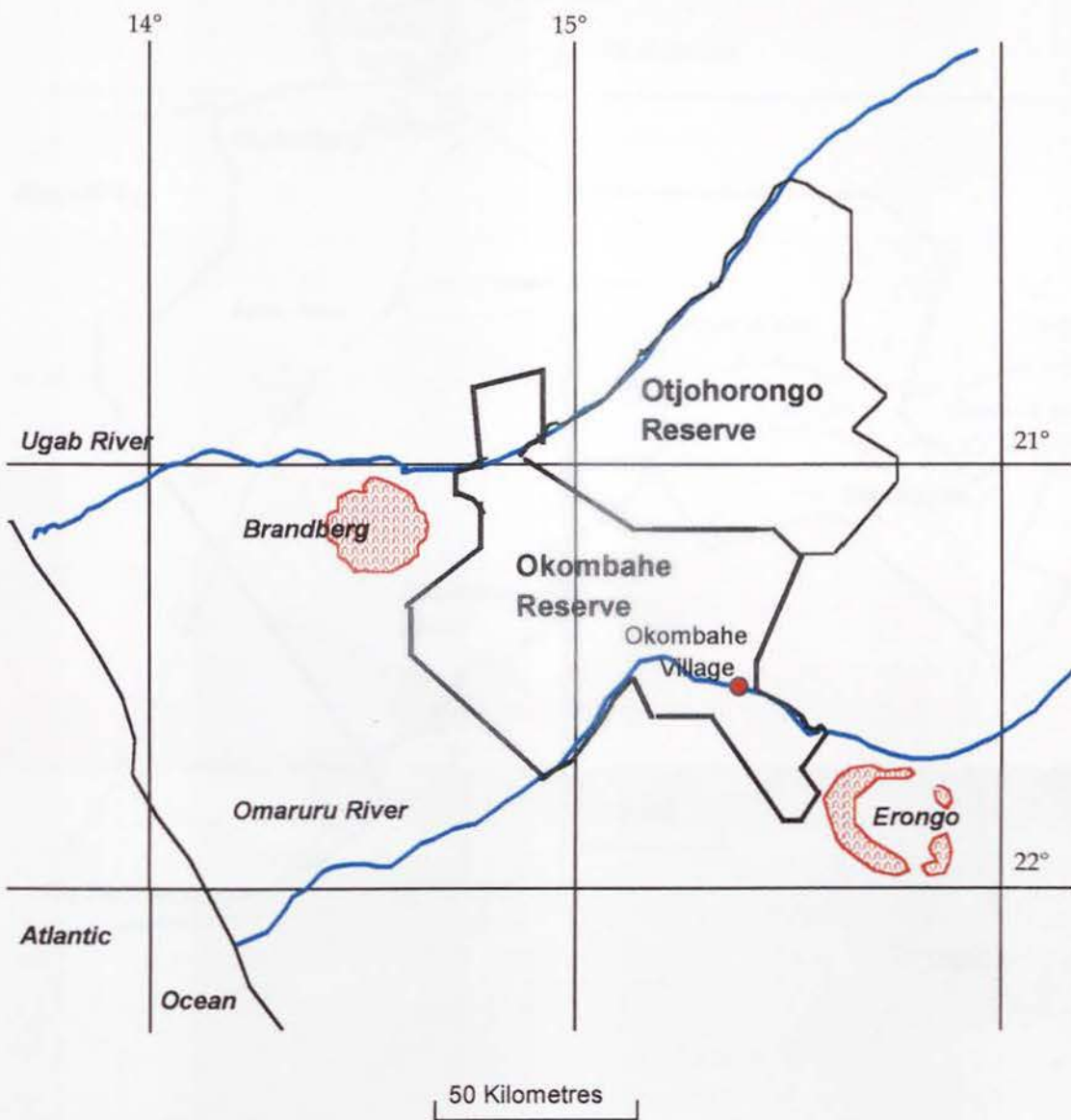
## MAP # 2 - DAMARALAND

- Major Towns
- Minor Towns
- Rivers
- Major Roads
- Gravel Roads
- Minor Gravel Roads



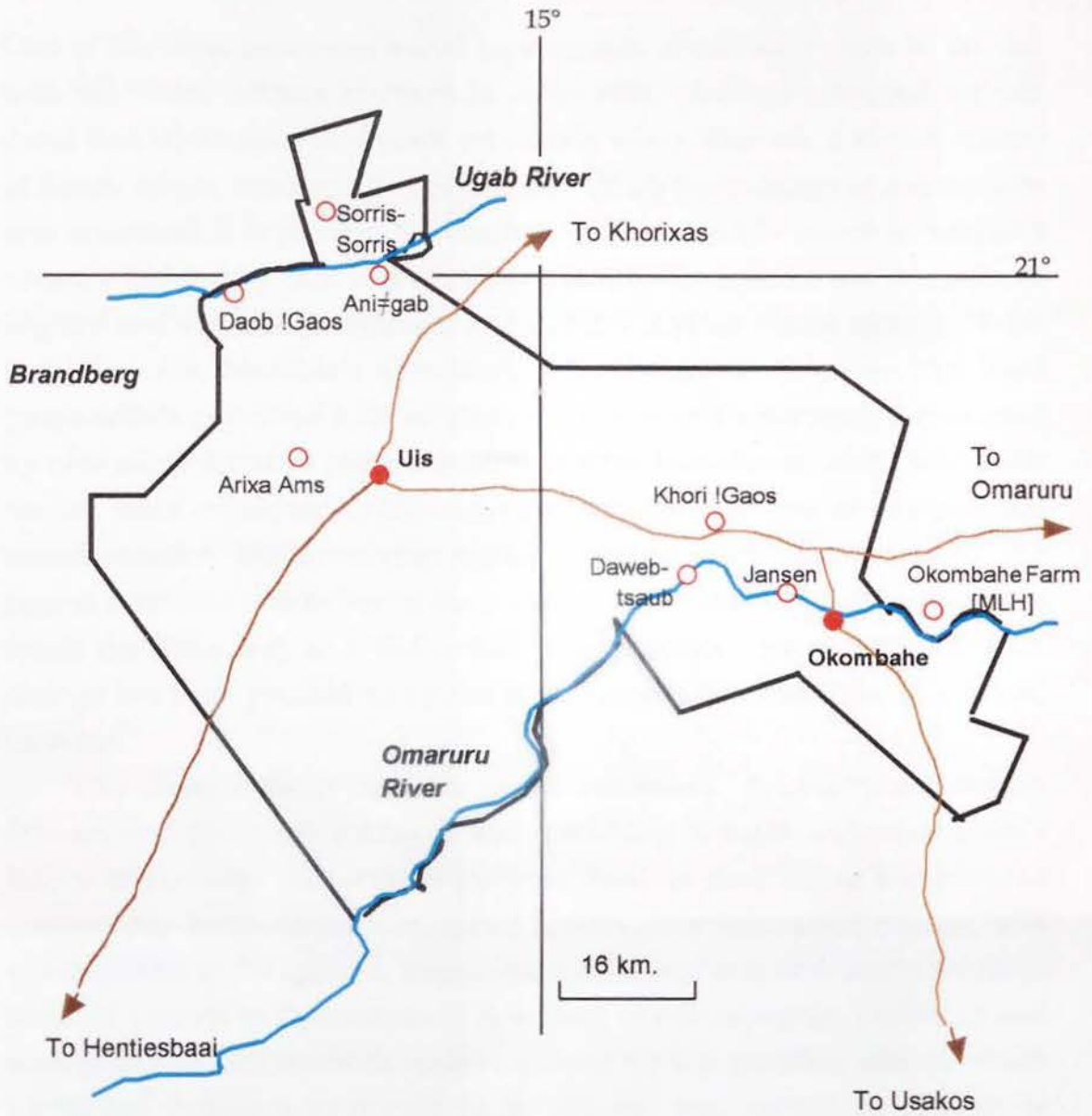
# MAP # 3 - OKOMBAHE RESERVE

[ Circa 1955]



MAP # 4 - OKOMBAHE & UIS WARDS

[OKOMBAHE RESERVE BOUNDARY]



## INTRODUCTION

I play the game, in other words, the game of pretending there's an order in the dust, a regularity in the system, or an interpenetration of different systems, incongruous but still measurable, so that every graininess of disorder coincides with the faceting of an order which promptly crumbles.

Italo Calvino in *Time and the Hunter* (1967: 30)

One of the most notorious social experiments of our time came to an end with the South African elections in April 1994. A dress rehearsal for this event had taken place four years previously when Namibia, a virtual colony of South Africa, achieved independence. Of all the excesses of colonialism and apartheid, it is perhaps the creation of 'homelands' - countries within a country defined by race and ethnicity - which characterise the extremes of bigotry and oppression inherent in Southern Africa's recent history. With independence, Namibia's homelands officially ceased to exist. The legal props which imprinted a racist ideology on the landscape were superseded by new administrative regions in 1992 and the homelands, along with their names, were consigned to the annals of history. In spite of this political transformation, the homelands persist in many essential respects: for the people who continue to live in these communal areas, daily life continues in much the same way as it did before independence. Social and economic change has been gradual and political transformation has come as a mixed blessing.

This thesis is about one such former homeland. It focuses on livestock farmers and their ability to cope with recurring drought and colonialism's legacy of poverty. Its ultimate purpose involves uncovering the complex relationship between culture, social history, environmental change, and development in the sparsely populated semi-desert area of western Namibia recently known as Damaraland. A variety of ethnographic, historical and ecological research methods were employed for this purpose, each of which presented different problems to be solved, and served to illuminate communal life and pastoral practice in this former homeland from a number of different perspectives. An understanding of how ethnographic, historical and scientific discourse has influenced the thinking of policy makers as well as the lives of communal inhabitants is central to my approach.

It is almost impossible to live or work in Southern Africa today without some awareness of what might be called a 'politics of representation'; the culture of apartheid itself was only the latest and most institutionalised form of a cultural imperialism fostering this consciousness. The fact that 'reconciliation' has succeeded in promoting a peaceful political transition does not obscure the persistence of deep structural inequalities affecting the majority of Namibia's population. And while the political and geographic framework of the homelands has been dismantled and the racist stereotypes which acted as props to apartheid's social and economic oppression have lost their power, the rhetoric of 'nation building' has yet to effect a deep change in this consciousness of ethnic identity. In writing about Damaraland, the paradox inherent in the act of presenting an authoritative account has necessarily become a recurrent theme in this thesis. The naturalising tropes of representation, whether expressed in visual images, descriptive narrative or empirical research are so entrenched in our culture, that they have become conflated with knowledge and cognition in complex ways. Perception itself is paradoxical: 'there is no vision without purpose. . . the innocent eye is blind' for the 'world is already clothed in our systems of representation' (Mitchell, quoted in Duncan & Ley 1993:4). Furthermore, the presentation and production of knowledge of the 'other' is inherently a temporal, historical and a political act (Fabian 1983:1): the history of Namibia is replete with illustrations of this fact.

The title of this thesis is meant to draw attention to the paradox (and irony) inherent in the act of representing the interests of others, of describing places and constructing histories. "Nature, cattle thieves and various other mid-night robbers" were words used by a prominent Damara government politician to characterise the causes of poverty and social fragmentation which beset one of the oldest settlements in Damaraland, Okombahe. These three images are a coded short-hand, honed by a long history of discourse employed to construct Damara identity.

'Nature' refers to the unpredictable desert environment in which the Damara live, where a subsistence economy based on hunting, gathering, herding and migrant labour has depended on the ability of people to move within a landscape according to the exigencies of climate beset by drought. Colonialism placed severe restrictions on the mobility of native populations and the environmental effects of this have been the subject of debate among planners and politicians throughout the colonial era, typified by predictions

of environmental collapse and desertification. Today, the legacy of this discourse has important ramifications in the social and economic development of former homeland populations.

The Damara have been referred to as 'cattle thieves' (amongst other things), since the early European traders and missionaries marked their presence in the landscape during the 19th century. Livestock theft amongst the Damara themselves has become a signifier of the 'cultural and moral disintegration' of Damara communities in much the same way as their characterisation as slaves and servants served to consolidate their inferior social position in the past.<sup>1</sup>

'Various other mid-night robbers' encompasses all the indigenous forces of social upheaval and inter-group conflict which have long been held responsible for the marginalisation of the Damara- speaking people.<sup>2</sup> Implicit in this portrayal of marginalisation at the hands of 'others' is the disavowal of responsibility for this state of affairs by the dominant power of the day, whether by the colonial regimes of the past or by representatives of the present government.

While such images seem to convey an essential 'grain of truth' about the Damara, they conceal more than they reveal. It is perhaps unfair to appropriate the remarks of this Damara politician out of context: they are extracts from a speech which opened an exhibition of photographs made by fourteen photographers from Damaraland. This exhibition was the culmination of a project I had started as part of my field research; it has ended up as a core element in this thesis - the photographs themselves are reproduced in the first chapter. In basing my ethnographic research squarely within the context of visual representations made of and by the Damara themselves, I was confronted by the paradox that 'the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled' (Berger 1972:7); that the way we see the world is dependent on what we know and believe. The opening speech from which the title is derived is discussed at length in

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<sup>1</sup> A similar constellation of images have been employed to characterise those labelled 'Bushmen' in Namibia. Robert Gordon's historical critique of the 'Bushman myth' (1992) raises many parallels with the ongoing process of the construction of Damara ethnicity through the interplay of policy, economics and academic discourse as they mesh to shape the future of these people.

<sup>2</sup> In post-independent Namibia, it is politically correct to categorise previously designated 'ethnic groups' according to language. However, since these language groups correspond closely to previous ethnic terminology, and as ethnic distinctions within language groups become politically relevant, this practice has begun to lose its potency in political discourse.

Chapter 3, and serves to illustrate one of a number of ways in which discourse is generated from this paradox.

Unlike previous studies of Damaras, the partial ethnography presented in this thesis draws its ultimate authority from photographic images made by the Damara subjects of this study and their comments on them. To this extent, the photographers and all those who took part in the production of the photographic exhibition are co-authors of this ethnography. Both images and comments provide a basis and pretext for discussing the nature of visual representation itself, the history of representations accompanying the formation of Damara identity and the impact which this history has on the politics of development in the present. The use of self-representation through photographic images presents numerous opportunities for ethnographic analysis, any one of which might comprise the subject of a thesis. My use of this methodology is constrained by my research objectives and therefore the photos serve as a means to convey the diversity and richness of communal life in relation to more global concerns surrounding the pastoral economy in general and environmental issues affecting policy and development in particular. These photographic images of people, place and landscape provide a framework from which to discuss the social and environmental history of Damaraland and their relationship to land tenure reform and pastoral development.

### **Damaraland: Socio-political Background**

Although Damaraland no longer officially exists, this communal area of western Namibia which recently comprised the Damaras' 'tribal homeland' has changed very little since Namibia's independence in 1990. This vast semi-arid area (48,000 square kilometres: larger than Denmark; one and a half times the size of Lesotho) wedged longitudinally between the Namib Desert to the west and the predominantly white owned cattle farms which occupy the central savanna plateau to the east, continues to support an impoverished rural population of 30,000 people including several thousand livestock farmers and their families (Maps 1 & 2). It bears many of the hallmarks of Bantustans throughout southern Africa: dependence on migrant labour and the burgeoning of rural settlements into rural ghettos are obvious signs of the gross inequalities fostered by a prolonged and bitter history of colonialism. It is impossible to discuss, let alone understand the lives of



Damaraland's inhabitants without continual reference to this history suffused with the imposition of colonial ideologies and indigenous resistance.

Crossing the border between the communal and commercial farm areas reminds me of that elusive moment which occurs in the daily experience of falling asleep or waking up: our mental state has obviously changed, but the transition itself remains obscure and hidden from consciousness. A similar mental boundary exists in the geography which separates communal and private property, imprinted on the landscape as an artefact of history, separating two inter-connected worlds, dividing wealth from poverty, private property from communal space, a stolid order built on institutionalised force separated from a structured chaos, peripheral and dependent. The crossing has no border posts, sentries or signs; at most it is marked by a cattle grid or a gate opened across the gravel surface of a dusty road.

Depending on where you cross and the time of year, the transition is more or less apparent: in early spring before the rains begin and especially during periods of prolonged drought, the dry standing grass within the neatly fenced commercial farms gives way immediately to bare earth, sand and rock within the old homeland. Infrequently, good summer rains erase this visible difference, sweeping the landscape in a continuous sea of grass and ephemeral flowers. A more or less sparse canopy of thorn scrub or mopane woodland flows uninterrupted across this implausible border, and rapidly thins as it stretches westwards into the communal heartland towards the Namib Desert. The widely dispersed, shaded commercial farm houses on one side are juxtaposed by clusters of rusty shacks, like ovens, baking in the intense glare of the desert sun, on the other. On the communal side, fences cease or are neglected and vandalised - the country is open to the meandering whims of donkey cart tracks and foot paths, an infinite number of short cuts and detours through the bush, dividing and converging in a loose web connecting each place to place.

Having entered the communal area, there is no mistaking the transition. Isolated farm houses and tin shacks, clustered settlements, villages and a few small towns are scattered across a vast and open landscape of undulating plains interrupted by granite intrusions, or broken mesas of Karoo sediment and sheet lava; the eroded remains of the coastal escarpment echo a violent past of continental collision and division. A

tracery of water courses and fan-shaped catchments grow into westward tending rivers, dry throughout most of the year but yielding cool water from bore-holes and wells, sustain homesteads and villages with their flocks of goats and sheep, some cattle, donkeys and small gardens.

Damara place names throughout much of Central Namibia attest to a pre-colonial history when Damara-speaking people inhabited this area as pastoralists and hunters-gatherers, migrating between water-holes and pasture land depending on unpredictable yearly rainfall. By the mid-nineteenth century when European traders were busy exploiting and decimating Namibia's large herds of game, elephants and ostrich, the Damara inhabitants in these western areas had already retreated to the more inaccessible mountains of the Khomas Hochlands, Erongo and Brandberg, at least partly as a defence against their more organised and aggressive Herero and Nama neighbours. /Â ‡Gomhes, (more commonly known by its Herero name Okombahe) became the first permanent settlement ceded by the Germans to the Damara in 1894. A fluid population of up to one thousand inhabitants lived here then, being drawn from groups of Damara living as far away as Otjimbingwe, Brandberg and Sesfontein, along with varying numbers of Nama and Herero. During the next seventy years this tiny enclave was to grow by stages into a "Native Reserve" of 1,800 square kilometres in 1923, enlarged to 4,200 square kilometres in 1947. By 1964, the Odendaal Commission, which was responsible for fixing the new tribal 'homeland' borders of 'grand apartheid', expanded this area to its present size by incorporating it with three other native reserves (Otjohorongo, Fransfontein and Sesfontein), state land and 223 commercial farms into what became known as Damaraland. After independence, new regions were delimited splitting Damaraland in two, the northern half being included in the Kunene Region and the southern half in Erongo.

### **The Construction of Damara Identity**

The Damara are an anomaly amongst the ethnic groupings of Namibia. Ethnographic classification place them in a pivotal position between racial categories of Bantu, Khoe and San; in economic taxonomies, they fall between foragers, herders and agriculturalists: they are black, like Bantu-speakers but speak Khoekhoe (Damara-Nama) and are known to have practised pastoralism, hunter-gathering, trading and to have been

subjugated, at one time or another, by their more powerful neighbours as slaves and bonded labourers. As a result, the Damara are conceptualised as a melting pot of an ancient underclass, a proto-type of the rural proletariat, as an historically disempowered, dispossessed residual cultural category.<sup>3</sup> At the same time they are typified as an adaptable people who quickly embraced Christianity and Western education; they are thought to be easily acculturated in their emerging roles within an expanding colonial and global economic system and to whom ethnic intermarriage was always common and incorporative, status notwithstanding.<sup>4</sup> The Damara have been variously described as the true aborigines of Namibia (Möller 1974:153), as ancient skilled metal workers (Wikar *in* Mossop, 1935:13), early traders and organised hunters (Alexander 1967 [1838]:133), as the dispossessed slaves of the pastoral Nama (Vedder 1938:35), and as a recent example of colonial ethnogenesis - 'the Cinderella people in Namibia's history' (Venter 1983:43). The scant literature concerned with the Damara people is set within the context of colonialism and written by non-Damara observers, often by direct agents of colonial power. Taken together, the defining characteristic of these representations is precisely a lack of definition; the tragic irony of this is not lost on the Damara themselves. "We grew up stupid" or "Our Damara people are sick" typify self-representations of unease resulting from the problematic experience of integration within the Namibian social economy. Much of what fashions this Damara self-identity today is the result of at least two centuries of subjugation associated with negative characterisations inherent to both indigenous and colonial discourse.

Damara identity is the joker in the pack of theoretical and ideological arguments surrounding the anthropology of Southern Africa. The construction of Damara ethnicity highlights the permeable 'fuzziness' of classifications which distinguish between foragers and herders (Barnard 1992: 27-8; Smith 1992:86), Khoisan and Bantu (Schapera 1930; Malan 1980:14; Nurse *et al* 1985:277-8), pristine aborigines (Lee 1979:1) and a historically determined proletariat (Wilmsen 1989:286; Wilmsen & Denbow 1990:489-507), the deep structure of culture as a "foraging ethos" (Barnard 1994:8) versus class analysis based on relations of production (Wilmsen

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<sup>3</sup> These categories have been marked out in detail within the so-called Kalahari Debate (Lee & Guenther 1991; Wilmsen & Denbow 1990. See Barnard 1992b for a full bibliographic summary of this debate.

<sup>4</sup> The acculturation of Damara has been commented on by ethnologists such as Vedder (1928; 1938), Köhler (1956; 1959) and Schmidt (1986; 1990).

1989:20). While this overview of theoretical debates merely skims the surface of contemporary academic controversies, it is possible to locate some aspect of Damara social and cultural history squarely within many of these conceptual categories in turn. Damara identity is continually affected by other's representations: their position within the larger regional and global web of power continuously impinges upon the reproduction of Damara self-image. Nevertheless, the persistent reproduction of a negative image is in itself an indication of a certain continuity of denial, a framing of cultural discourse within dominant ideological limits. It is therefore necessary to distinguish the constructed dichotomy of racial classification and cultural process within ideological discourses which define and create marginality. Unlike the espousal of homogenising nationalism, which seeks to undermine difference in the cause of a larger unity, it is pertinent to address difference from a hermeneutic (Damara) point of view while pointing out that the anomalous position of Damara identity is axiomatic to outmoded but persistent ideologies underpinning national and regional discourse.

If we accept the view of cultural identity as fluid, "subject to the 'play' of history and representation, plural and diverse, if not actually divided, and unified only by those retrospective processes which *narrate* them as unified" (Hall 1996:v), then the dichotomy contained within stereotypical images of Damara identity might be seen as indicative of wider ideological forces which focus on conflicts arising out of power inequality and economic subordination on the one hand and inherent cultural or ethnic 'dispositions' on the other. Narratives which focus on the 'problem' of Damara maladjusted acculturation, manifesting as alcoholism, laziness, domestic violence, marital instability etc., portray the Damara as victims of overarching structural constraints wherein 'race' or 'ethnic character' is dressed up as cultural dispossession: 'culture' is understood as a response to victimisation and marginalisation. Positive images of Damara identity likewise rely on a narrative in which acculturation is the defining positive cultural attribute: christianization, education and loyal service to higher authority for example, are the result of shedding negative indigenous cultural ascriptions (based on poverty, subservience and powerlessness) and the assumption of western modernity, albeit as marginal participants. Hence, the 'culture of poverty' narrative persists as the main prop for a problematised contemporary Damara self-image.

It is ironic, that the discourse surrounding 'ethnic identity' in Namibia has tended to conflate 'culture' and 'race' in the case of almost all other groups including those marginalised darlings of anthropologists, the Bushmen. San, Khoe and Bantu have all been accorded a racial position within a 'tribal paradigm', a 'mode of production' or a 'mode of thought'. The Damara however are lost within these neat systems of classification and are therefore assigned a position similar to that of blacks in Britain "where Asians have 'ethnicity', African-Caribbeans have 'race', a formulation consolidated by the long-standing belief in the cultural vacuity of black life" (Alexander 1996:12). The ascription of 'Damaraness' as stemming from the loss of culture through both pre-colonial and colonial marginalisation focuses both ethnicity and racial classification in a negative definition of culture, an absence of definition, a residual category of neither this nor that.

If it is true to say that "cultural experience or indeed every cultural form is radically, quintessentially hybrid. . ." (Said 1993:68), it is also valid to point out that the construction of identity and difference, whether this is in the form of race, ethnic character or class (based on relations of production), testify to ideologies which have cultural correlates. Culture is seen as an integral ingredient in the construction of identity which, understood as the conscious maintenance of difference through the creation and maintenance of boundaries, also becomes a symbol of difference. The freedom of the individual to move within this grid of cultural, ethnic or racial differences is dependent on the degree to which equality of status and consensus within relations of power exist. It is not my intention to portray the Damara in terms of anthropological debates concerning culture and ideology, but rather to identify and locate the present influence which these exercise in processes of social change taking place in former Damaraland. To the extent that cultures become reified and inscribed within essentialist, racist or liberal notions of cultural difference, the Damara, precisely because of their anomalous position within discourses of difference, have remained on the side-lines of ethnic disputes. Patently, this has not prevented Damara individuals from being embroiled in the heavy racist and ethnic politics of southern Africa. Rather, it has been the chief mechanism for the reproduction of their marginal status.

Language as a cultural marker is another flag which the Damara have been unable to hoist alongside that of other ethnic groups. Today, it is considered politically correct to refer to 'Damara-speakers' in the rhetorical

idiom of post- apartheid Namibia. However, they share this language with 'Nama-speakers', who claim this language as their own as one element in a whole set of residual boundary markers. Furthermore, until recently, the lack of a standard Damara-Nama orthography and an education system dominated by Afrikaans has resulted in few publications in this language; even the government's weekly newspaper (*New Era*) which prints articles in every major Namibian language carries nothing in Damara/Nama. Since independence in 1990, a mass literacy campaign promoting both Damara and English has only just begun to have significant effects in this regard.

In spite of all this, a seemingly disproportionate number of Damara individuals play important roles in national politics, serving as ministers, party officials, and high ranking civil servants under the ruling South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO). Apart from indicating the extent to which the forgoing generalisations obtain in the politics of identity, this observation raises the issue of class formation within the national polity. While ethnic politics continue to generate heat within the both local and national political discourse, the ending of apartheid has opened up the possibility of class mobility to black Namibians. In this regard, there is little to differentiate the class interests of whites from those of a rapidly emerging black elite, which inevitably includes many Damara individuals.

The recognition that culture, ethnicity, race and class are themselves cultural constructs implies that they are also subject to negotiation, resistance and subversion. Complex manifestations of this were recorded in the study area as generational, gendered and class oriented responses to rapid socio-political changes. Differences in styles of language, dress, and preferences with regard to music and dance served as external objectified standards within rural Damara 'communities' commonly considered to be homogenous by outsiders. The constant creation and reworking of 'style' in response to contemporary media influences, consumerism, a variety of church denominations, and the residual signs of the colonial past embodied in the manners of the older generation are all indications of the extent to which the outside world has impinged on such rural populations. While it is not the purpose of this thesis to elaborate on such differentials within Damara communities, the whole idea of community, and what it actually means to its 'members', is crucial to it.

The idea of kinship and its relation to community is also central to any analysis of Damara community, as is the function of reciprocity and

property relations, and the conceptualisation of spatial boundaries and inter-group identities. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate these in depth. What is essential however, is to contextualise the economy of pastoralism within a sociological analysis based on such a framework of ethnographic research, in order to elucidate generalised micro-level practices in relation to government policy and development initiatives.

## **History and the Meaning of Place**

One of the approaches which I take in untangling the skein of cultural, social, economic and political factors which underlie the response of communal farmers to development is by contextualising the history of Okombahe in terms of the socially constructed and competing meanings of place, both as narratives and embodied experience.

Places are obviously more than analytical anthropological constructs. "They are politicised, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions" (Rodman 1992: 641). They are created through experience, through living. Places are narratives in their own right, not just features of locals' and geographers' narratives. Places come into being through discourse, arising from both subjective, phenomenological experience and decentred, objective conceptualisation. "Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings." (Said 1993: 6) These ideas, forms, images and imaginings grow directly out of the unique reality experienced by each inhabitant and the web of shared and contested meanings which this creates between people and places. The narrative forms which arise out of the experience of forced removals, the creation of homelands, political exile, and internal migration are common globally and at the same time find unique expression in the histories of individuals and places. It is the contest over this multivocal Damara history which animates both the ethnographic and the empirical research presented in this thesis.

The second approach which I employ to understand the meaning of place is through the structuring of space in terms of property relations. As Ferguson observes,

property is not a relation between people and things. It is a relation between people, concerning things. And if property is always a social relation, one can state as a corollary that property is always structured - always, everywhere, property is structured (1990:142).

This structure is implicated in everything from personal identity to leadership and political consciousness, from livestock farming practices to migration and drought coping strategies. To a large extent property relations in Damaraland are flexible and uninstitutionalised, forming a core of 'common sense' practice which renders them invisible to external observers.

Typical of Damara property relations is a land tenure practice which is crucial to the ability of farmers to survive in this semi-desert area, riven by frequent and prolonged droughts. In common with many other people living in communal areas throughout dryland Africa, the Damara have been blamed for causing land degradation and unsustainable use of natural resources due to a land tenure system which leads to uncontrolled overgrazing. Part of the purpose of this thesis is to examine the actual impact which Damara farmers have had on the environment and to argue that like other aspects of property as social relations, land tenure has evolved as an appropriate and sustainable response to environmental, economic and political circumstances. This 'objectivist' analysis of the relation between Damara farmers and the environment forms a counter weight to a critical, interactive ethnographic approach using visual and narrative expressions of Damara self-representation to discuss place, property and social interaction.

### **Land Tenure, Pastoral Development and the Environment**

In Namibia today, one of the most emotionally charged and politically difficult issues of social and economic reform is land ownership; approximately 4,000 white farmers continue to own nearly sixty percent of all utilizable agricultural land. During the past seven years it has become evident that the government does not intend to press for radical change in this regard. Its powers to appropriate and distribute private land have been used on only a minor scale; a small number of commercial farms have been purchased in order to resettle destitute and landless people, and financial assistance has been provided to some members of a small emerging black elite to purchase their own commercial farms. Meanwhile, as rural,



communal populations grow, increasing demands are put on scarce natural resources raising concerns about long-term environmental damage. The long over-due communal land tenure reform act has yet to be passed. Given these limitations underlying the extent to which land reform might address the social and economic problems facing the populations of former homeland areas, planners and policy makers have been forced to look elsewhere for solutions.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address national development policy debates, these formed the background to my study. Since my field research was designed to find answers to questions directly relating to the lives of communal farmers, government initiatives concerned with drought relief, desertification, natural resource management and land tenure reform affected the formulation of such questions. How do communal farmers cope with recurrent drought? What, if anything, regulates the practice of land tenure arrangements? How important is the livestock economy to this rural area? What is the relationship between social networks based on kinship and reciprocity and the ability of farmers to migrate during drought? What effects do social stratification, migrant labour, weak local political leadership and urban migration have on this scattered rural population? As I began to find answers to some of these questions, I began to understand the extent to which national programmes and local development initiatives were steeped in discourses which seemed alien to Damaraland's rural population. Furthermore, it seemed that many dubious assumptions were being put forward by planners regarding environmental degradation, inappropriate farming methods, unstable land tenure systems and Damara social organisation.

Today the hiatus occasioned by the collapse of Damaraland's Bantustan administration is slowly giving way to new political and economic structures heavily influenced by centralised state control. The under-funded and weak Regional government plays only a minor role in the burgeoning of rural development projects, an expanding tourist industry, conservation programmes and long awaited land reform. A new generation of development initiatives couched in terms of 'sustainability', 'community based natural resource management' and 'participatory planning' are in many ways as alien to this communal population as their more overtly oppressive predecessors. As the tools of policy, these concepts are well intentioned and to a large extent benign. The tragedy lies in their inability to

address not only the deep poverty of the area, but to simply engage with it in the first place.

This dysfunctional situation has come about as a result of several factors - high on the list of these is a severe limitation in central government capacity coupled with a fragmented socio-political structure at the local level, creating large gaps in the chain of communication necessary for effective policy implementation. This is further complicated by a failure of policy makers to recognise the innate 'common sense' or 'indigenous knowledge' which regulates communal life and makes it possible for communal inhabitants to survive in this harsh environment. This was brought home to me forcefully on several occasions, one of which will serve as an example of what I am talking about.

In October 1995, I attended a 'farmers day' in Okombahe, along with about eighty local men and women who were addressed by veterinary and agricultural advisors, most of whom were white and had worked in the commercial farming areas prior to independence. The meeting took place in the dining hall of the old age home known locally as Blau Berg, (or 'blue mountain' because it is the largest structure in the village and painted blue) built by the Bantu Administration in the 1960s to house 'retired' Damaras sent here from other parts of Namibia: it is now a derelict shell, the vandalised heart of this rural ghetto.

It seemed fitting that the speaker who opened the meeting did so with an over-head projection depicting wealth disparity in Namibia: the poorest fifty-five percent of the population 'own' three percent of Namibia's GDP; the richest three percent 'own' seventy percent of national wealth. Even those illiterate people who couldn't understand this visually abstract formulation, presented in the form of pie-charts and graphs, knew that they fell into a category well below the average annual per capita income of \$N280 (£47)<sup>5</sup> of the poorest fifty-five percent. What these statistics fail to take account of is the equally wide disparity of income existing within Okombahe itself: my own research suggests that the meagre GDP of Okombahe (and Damaraland generally) is similarly divided between the few *relatively* wealthy and the many *absolutely* poor.<sup>6</sup> The implications of this

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this thesis an exchange rate of N\$6 to £1 has been used. During fieldwork, the exchange rate was approximately N\$5.6/£1; rapid devaluation in the wake of South Africa's political transition resulted in an exchange rate of N\$7.7/£1 during 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Absolute poverty is measured against the minimum food requirements "necessary to maintain a person's physical efficiency" (Iliffe 1987:2). The occurrence of undernutrition in

disparity, in appreciating how the poor actually survive, are rarely even guessed at by outsiders.

One after another, these experts gave lectures on various aspects of animal health, rangeland management and supplementary livestock feeds. Much of this information was either irrelevant to communal farming conditions or already part of the basic knowledge of communal farmers. To crown it all, one advisor used the 'teach a man to fish' parable to explain the purpose of a new rangeland management initiative proposed for the Okombahe area.<sup>7</sup> Many farmers were perplexed by the purpose of this development programme, others found it patronising and offensive. After all, these skilled communal farmers had managed to survive extreme climatic, environmental and socio-economic conditions through ingenuity and hard work which few commercial farmers could possibly withstand. The cultural divides engendered by 100 years of colonialism live on in the mental landscapes of many Namibians, between ethnic and 'racial' groups, and between rapidly emerging socio-economic classes. The potential tragedy facing the inhabitants of Damaraland is that the limited efforts of well intentioned government and donor agencies to rectify the hardship, inequalities and lost opportunities of the past will fail because of the false assumptions engendered by the difficulties in bridging this gulf.

The outcome of this farmers' meeting in Okombahe was indicative of the misunderstandings which commonly arise when outside advisors attempt to introduce development to rural farmers in Damaraland. Development policy is informed by a specifically western way of knowing: "like 'civilisation' in the nineteenth century, 'development' is the name not only for a value, but also for a dominant problematic or interpretive grid through which the impoverished regions of the world are known to us" (Ferguson 1990:xiii). Implicit to the production of this kind of knowledge is the perpetuation of a 'cultural' imperialism in the form of centralised bureaucratic and state power. It is cultural in the sense that it is based on a global economic structure which grew out of colonialism, and continues to address a colonial legacy, having become generalised and claiming legitimacy as a model of how (other) people experience the world: it seeks to order the way the world should work on this basis. Past ethnographic representations are implicit to

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children is a wide-spread indication of absolute poverty in Damaraland where the incidence of child stunting is one of the highest in Namibia at forty-five percent (Rohde 1993:25)

<sup>7</sup> While few if any of these dryland farmers knew the first thing about fishing, most of them are steeped in biblical imagery, and so this metaphor was not entirely out of place.

the functioning of this discourse: characterisations of Namibia's ethnic groups were a product of and a prop to imperialist ideologies resulting in Apartheid. In spite of the demise of these overtly racist policies since independence, Namibians are still subject to similar forms of misrepresentation under the guise of development paradigms which seek to regulate and define social reality in terms of an objectivist division between humans and their environment. Development in the form of conservation policy and land tenure reform are often little more than tinkering around the edges of the huge social and economic disparities inherited from colonialism. This is indicative of the impotence of the government's socialist agenda in the face of the overwhelming force of the late twentieth century capitalist global economy and illustrates the way this dominant ideology disguises itself in politically acceptable forms. "Like 'goodness' itself, 'development' in our time is a value so entrenched that it seems almost impossible to question it, or to refer to it by any other standard beyond its own" (1990: xiv). As Barnard points out in relation to Bushmen development initiatives, the perceptions and meanings of development objectives "in the context of [local] cultures may be very different from their context in the planners' world view" (1995:2).

## **Fieldwork**

The core of my field research took place between February 1995 and April 1996. During this time I spent just over twelve months living in the small farm settlement of Jansen just outside the village of Okombahe. Previous to this I had visited the area during field trips to Damaraland as part of my research into issues of land tenure and migration in response to drought during the years 1992, 1993 and 1994.<sup>8</sup> When I returned to Jansen in 1995, I did what I imagined anthropologists were supposed to do in "those ritually repetitive confrontations with the Other which we call fieldwork" (Fabian 1983:149): I 'hung out', made friends, followed up acquaintances made on previous visits, attended meetings, spoke with officials, struggled to communicate in Damara and as far as possible tried to make myself useful to my neighbours. I worked in gardens, accompanied herders to the veld, gathered wild honey and veld foods with friends, helped neighbours collect fire-wood and taxied them to and from the village.

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<sup>8</sup> See Rohde 1993; 1994.

Much of my time was spent sitting in the shade, listening to gossip and domestic conversation, sharing cigarettes, beer and food and asking an inordinate number of questions about everything I could think of. In other words, my 'research' was more involved with making and maintaining personal relationships than pursuing a predetermined set of objectives. I developed strong relationships with a variety of men, women and children, starting with the extended family who generously allowed me to make my permanent camp next to their homestead. I felt privileged to be called 'uncle', 'older brother', 'son' and 'gorilla man' by three generations of the Pietersen household and through them was given access to the social lives of school children, young adults, my middle aged contemporaries and elders. From time to time I camped at other outlying settlements or visited friend's relatives in the urban townships in the surrounding commercial farm areas.

At the same time, my interest in the ecology of this semi-arid environment grew. Like everybody else, I began to long for rain and when it finally came was amazed at the dynamism and beauty of the landscape, transformed from a drought-stricken desert into a luscious prairie land. Annual grasses and flowers appeared as if by magic and within a matter of weeks set seed and began to dry. Bare trees and shrubs produced foliage, flowers and fruits which were gathered and eaten, or brewed into alcoholic drinks. I began collecting botanical specimens and was gradually able to identify the area's major tree, shrub and grass species. As a respite from constant socialising, I began to explore the veld, searching out the sites of archival landscape photographs and conducting vegetation surveys. As a result of this, I began to understand the phenology of important tree and shrub species and at the same time to developed a patchwork of insights into the history of local vegetation change.

Having begun my field research with an unstructured, open-ended approach, by the time I left Okombahe the major themes of this thesis had been consolidated. Without having consciously planned it, these grew out of my interest in photography. During the early stages of my fieldwork, I realised that my ability to photograph the people and landscapes of Damaraland was severely limited, by both my ignorance of what I was seeing and by my lack of photographic skill. So when the idea of providing cameras to friends and acquaintances came to me by chance, I realised that this would provide me with an ideal medium to discuss many aspects of the personal and social experiences of the people around me. In a similar vein,

the use of archival landscape photos became a starting point for looking into both social and environmental history.

When the time finally came to commit myself to writing about all of this, many compromises had to be made; some of the most important aspects of my personal experience had necessarily to be omitted from this account in the interests of structuring a thesis which combines several research disciplines. As Fabian warns: "these disjunctions between experience and science, research and writing, will continue to be a festering epistemological sore" in the discipline of anthropology as long as researchers disavow their personal relationships with the people they are writing about (1983: 33). To the limited extent that I have engaged in ethnographic discourse, I have tried to evoke the expressive poetics of personal encounters, which might otherwise only be accessible in fiction, through visual imagery and my involvement in its production.

## **The Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis is divided into three parts which roughly correspond to the epistemological styles of ethnography, social history and environmental history.

Part I is concerned with issues of ethnographic representation and is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 explores the practical and theoretical issues raised by the work of sixteen Damara photographers. A description of the events which led to these photographs being shown as an exhibition precedes the presentation of the photographs themselves. These images form the chapter's core and provide a basis for the theoretical analysis of the physiological, cognitive, and political interpretations of visual representation. In Chapter 2, I discuss the work of each photographer from a critical and personal perspective; the photographs provide a basis for exploring social, economic and cultural aspects of Damara experience and provide a pretext for ethnographic description. The politics of representation, expressed in both historical and contemporary discourse surrounding Damara identity is the subject of Chapter 3.

Part II examines the social history of Okombahe. The meaning of place, as a socially constructed and continually evolving locus of meaning is analysed in three chapters which examine the historical experience of the inhabitants of Okombahe in relation to regional economic, social and

political processes. Chapter 4 examines the first fifty years of Okombahe's existence as a settlement (1870 to 1920) in the context of colonial incursion and consolidation using a critical collation derived from the research of several Namibian historians. Chapter 5 brings this history into the present tense by tracing the responses of Okombahe's pastoralists to cyclic climatic patterns and the evolution of the 'reserve'/'homeland system'. Contemporary socio-economic conditions in Okombahe village and its outlying settlements are made comprehensible through this historical contextualisation in Chapter 6.

Part III summarises my research into the environmental history of the arid and semi-arid areas of western Namibia, within the semi-desert savanna transition zone, also classified as part of the Nama-Karoo Biome which dominates the vegetation of western Damaraland. Chapter 6 is a detailed account of four sites which illustrate the problems of constructing environmental history using matched ground photography as a methodology for ascertaining vegetation change. The results of an overall analysis of 38 photo sites (based on 49 matched photographs) which were surveyed during fieldwork lead to the formulation of several key questions in relation to vegetation change and to human impacts on this environment. Chapter 7 focuses these questions through the use of matched aerial photography, rainfall data and the social histories of six communal settlements including Okombahe. Several conclusions are drawn which have important implications on prospective land reform legislation as well as other government policies pertaining to social and environmental issues.

Finally, a conclusion draws all the strands of this research together and makes suggestions as to how this information might ultimately reflect on the daily lives of communal farmers and their extended families, who, against great odds, survive in this former homeland with fortitude, dignity and humour.

## **PART I**

### **ETHNOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS**



# CHAPTER 1

## PHOTOGRAPHY, FIELDWORK AND ETHNOGRAPHY: "HOW WE SEE EACH OTHER"

Such is the photograph: it cannot *say* what it lets us see.

Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1993: 100)

Yet it might be that the photographic ambiguity, if recognised as such, could offer to photography a unique means of expression.

John Berger in *Another way of telling* (1989: 96)

'How we see each other' was the title of an exhibition of photographs which were made by sixteen individuals and their families living in the area of my fieldwork between February and April 1995. This exhibition and the photo project from which it arose, were one aspect of my fieldwork which had the general purpose of presenting an ethnography of the predominantly Damara speaking inhabitants of Okombahe. These photos form the core of this chapter. The presentation of this visual material is preceded by a short discussion of some of the theoretical and practical considerations which I find most persuasive as a justification for eliding the ethnographic norm of representation through writing. This theme is taken up with somewhat more intensity in the concluding section of this chapter where I explore the theoretical possibilities which lend photographic representation legitimacy as an ethnographic idiom, a discursive medium which because of its association with colonialism and objectivist approaches to ethnography is only rarely acknowledged in the discipline of anthropology.

### Photos and Fieldwork

Anthropology and photography have followed parallel and intersecting courses since their origins in the 19th century (Edwards 1992:1-16). On the one hand this concurrence can be thought of as a means whereby anthropology appropriated and used the still photograph as a tool in its evolving enterprise and on the other as a history of "the signifiatory frameworks whereby (photographic) images are endowed and closed with meaning" (Pinney 1992: 90). Part of the richness of the photograph resides precisely in the indeterminacy of its meaning in the shifting context of

production and consumption. Still photographs embody the relationships between photographer and photographed, elucidating the social processes inherent in the creation and consumption of images while at the same time eliding a strict definition of the image's meaning. Likewise, culture (and the study of culture) which "is a contract between creators and consumers" (Barthes 1993: 28) can only be explored through an approach which recognises this plurality of meaning.

Recent critical approaches to the use of photography in colonial and ethnographic discourse have examined the ideological purposes underpinning this use of visual 'evidence' (Pinney 1992:74; Marcus 1994:38). Ethnographic methodology itself has:

strangely anachronistic echoes, harking back to the classical credo that 'seeing is believing'. In this it is reminiscent of the early biological sciences, where clinical observation, the penetrating human gaze, was frankly celebrated (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 8).

The very act of perception itself is an acquired and hence a cultural skill, a cognitive process which involves the construction of a personal world as part of a shared communal and cultural one.

Human beings do not read the environment the way a computer reads a diskette, nor do they simply see it through a veil of pre-arranged words and symbols. Rather, in understanding and constructing their environments, they use prelinguistic capacities for perception, categorization, memory and evaluation, and when they do formulate their understandings in terms of words and symbols, they may use them in ways that are creative and idiosyncratic (Ingham 1996:54).

Perception, sight and vision do not exist in isolation, they arise in a world of movement and behaviour, through interaction and exploration. Learning to see is usually achieved so unconsciously at an early age that its immense complexity remains hidden from us. It is this ocular unconscious which both enables and modifies our vision of the world. "Its power... lies precisely in the biological ease of vision which naturalises what is in fact a cultural construct" (Kliem 1995, quoted in Hayes 1996:9). It constitutes a kind of second nature, a visual habitus which gives support and coherence to an invisible subjective whole. "It is insufficient to see; one must look as well" (Sachs 1995: 111): it is this 'second nature' inherent in 'looking' which

determines and informs so much of the photographic material related to ethnographic representation.

On the other hand, poststructuralist and deconstructionist writers (e.g. Burgin 1982, 1986; Pinney 1990, 1992) idealise both the sensate and ideological filters through which we perceive the human body and its material relations, as a *tabula rasa* inscribed with arbitrary semantic categories:

Outside of discourse or the splintering subject or the floating sign there is, for them, no enduring objective world. Rejecting all traffic with reality as brute 'positivism' - as a matter of physical properties imposing themselves on passive subjects - they are unreceptive to the idea that material facts have any role at all in human experience. Yet there is undeniable evidence that biological contingencies constrain human perception and social practice, albeit in ways mediated by cultural forms (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:40).

The history of culturally mediated materialities - the human body, physical objects - is the temporal interface between physical 'facts' and social values, where collectivities emerge as dispositions and common practice.

Until recently, the 'ethnographic gaze' of the photographer has been reproduced in the form of images depicting 'natives', 'ethnic groups' or exotic 'others' almost exclusively by outsiders, usually by white, European males.<sup>1</sup> I decided to turn this situation on its head by giving cameras to the Namibians among whom I was living. I hoped that they would show me

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<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions to this include studies of Navajo film makers (Worth and Adair 1975); Chalfen's interest in 'home-movie' making in the USA (1975); and Hubbard's selection of photographs made by native American youth (1994). During the last five years or so, self-representation has become wide-spread in both still photography and video media: the Guardian's publication of photos taken by people living rough on the streets of London and the BBC's Video Nation are obvious examples. I know of several experiments similar to the Okombahe Photographer's Project: The Cornwall Young Women's Photography Project organised by the Falmouth based photographer Valerie Reardon involved women living on low-incomes who were interested in using the medium of photography to explore female identity (Reardon 1994); the Pavilion in Leeds, one of the few centres for women photographers in Britain which has produced critical work starting out from a position similar to that of the Okombahe project, but developing the expressive and critical sides of photographic representation to a greater extent (Chaplin 1994: 112-123); and Wendy Ewald's work from Gujarat where she taught rural school children how to develop and print their own photographs (Ewald 1996). During the 1990s photography as an educational tool has become almost commonplace: programmes developed by organisations such as Glasgow's Street Level Gallery have included projects and exhibitions by groups as diverse as women on probation, school children and social workers. Similar projects have been organised by the Photographers Gallery in London (Wombel 1997) and the Edinburgh based photographer Kenny Bean, who has worked with school children in Leith and Nepal.

something about how they looked at themselves and their world. What meanings would be generated from this intersection of gazes taken one step closer to the source of my interest? Would this enable me to interpret their expressive visual sense, their world of spatial and social relationships?

The photographic images which open this account were produced and contextualized by people from Okombahe; they constitute an 'insiders' view of daily life. They portray the concerns, values and aspirations of 'ordinary' men and women from youth to old age and at the same time, provide a wealth of detail relating to material conditions and social interactions. These photographs and their author's comments articulate a narrated world, one in which seeing, no less than saying, implies a constructed reality of intelligible relationships. As a whole, the images create a multi-vocal discourse about life in Okombahe, arising from both conscious and 'taken for granted' realities of everyday living.

By opening my account of fieldwork through the images and narratives of the people who form the subject of my study, I hope to avoid (for the time being) some of the problems inherent in writing ethnography. The complicated business of representation and the construction of 'knowledge of the other' is thrown back onto the 'subjects' themselves, who address the viewer and reader directly. The act of 'othering' becomes a symbolic 'selfing'; in this sense the politics of representation are confronted at the outset. The method in which anthropology constructs its object says as much, if not more, about ourselves and our society as those about whom we write (and photograph). I am not disclaiming the empirical value and authority of ethnographic representation *per se*, but it is essential to acknowledge the inherently political nature of ethnographic discourse, which after all, in Namibia has a particularly nasty history.

The story of the photography project lends itself to an experimental approach to writing ethnography, first of all by its implicit recognition of the complex matrix of representations which are generated in and around rural Damara speakers. It is multi-vocal in the primary sense of incorporating diverse individual representations and narratives; it is dialogic insofar as many aspects of the project involved negotiation between myself and photographers relating to the objectives of the project and interpretations of individual photographs; it is reflexive from the point of view of the photographers, their subjects, myself as an active participant and the public at large in response to the photographs mounted as an exhibition. Both the

images and the photographer's comments on them open the possibility of rethinking the issue of distance and otherness, and directly address questions concerning cultural space, the sense of temporality and narrative authority. An attention to the process of the project as a whole, rather than to the photographs themselves, as artefacts, contributes to a resolution of some of the problems of writing ethnography and representing 'others'.

Another reason for introducing an account of Okombahe through photographs is that my fieldwork there coincided roughly with the course of the photography project which took a year to complete. Many of my friends and neighbours became involved and it was one of the ways in which I was able to establish active, reciprocal relationships with people during the time I was trying to learn the Damara language as well as all the other unspoken languages of social interaction relating to status, identity, personal space, humour, emotion, exchange, trust. . . all articulated by various degrees of the visual and the verbalised. The story of the project follows not only my personal narrative of fieldwork, but also the story of the project to its completion as an exhibition held at the National Art Gallery in Windhoek. The shared reality of this experience (and reality must be shared to become real) provided a grounding from which I began to understand social and cultural processes relating to broader themes of property relations and development which will be explored during the course of this thesis.

### **The Photo Project: Methodology**

Prior to arriving in Okombahe, I had visited many farms and settlements across Damaraland as part of my research into farmers' responses to drought and issues related to land tenure generally but I rarely stayed in any one place for longer than a few weeks. I was therefore looking for a base where I could stay for an extended period of time, somewhere that was in the heart of a farming community, somewhere with shade and a source of clean water, a place where the problems of alcohol abuse were minimal and a situation which would afford me some privacy. I had first visited Jansen, a small settlement 5 kilometres down river from Okombahe, in October 1992 when I had been taken there to see a garden project and was impressed by the relatively lush fruit trees and productive vegetable plots adjacent to the dry river bed of the Omaruru. I re-visited Jansen several times during the following two years, camping beneath the dense *Prosopis* trees and striking

up a friendship with a young man who it later transpired was well known to be an inveterate liar and petty thief. However, in my innocence, I determined to make this my base and so arrived with Annatjie, my interpreter, a young Nama woman from the south, late one summer's evening and set up camp within 50 yards of what was to become my adapted family.

Over the following days and weeks I met the heads of all the families in Jansen and began to introduce myself to people living in scattered settlements along the river and make occasional forays to Okombahe. I interviewed farmers and counted livestock and began to look for people who would be interested in taking photographs. The process of selecting photographers was rather *ad hoc* : I wanted to include as wide a range of people as possible in terms of age, sex and circumstance, but it hardly seemed to matter where I started. I had no way of judging the suitability of potential photographers and left much of the selection up to chance and my shaky instincts.

At this stage it was nearly impossible to convey the reasons behind my eccentric offer of a free camera, film and processed prints although I tried to explain that my research involved finding out how people saw the world around them, through photographs. I said that life in Okombahe was in many ways unique and unknown to the outside world; that as photographers they should think about how they would like to portray their personal experience of rural life and finally that their photos might eventually be exhibited in Windhoek. I presented individuals with the opportunity to use a camera (most had never done so before), and to photograph whatever subjects interested them. I emphasised that their finished work would be shown to a wider audience of people who would otherwise never begin to imagine what life here was really like. I also suggested that personal, informal photographs were just as interesting as consciously posed images, and that they should consider concentrating on subjects which conveyed the flavour of their immediate circumstances. It is difficult to know how much of this was taken to heart.

There was very little that could go wrong in operating the disposable 35mm cameras: a shutter button, film winder with frame numbers and a flash button are the only movable parts. It seemed necessary to stress that they should be kept clean and out of the heat. After a few minutes of instructions regarding lighting, framing and the use of the flash, the

photographers were ready to start. They were given between two and four weeks to complete the film of 24 frames and many were given a second camera after having discussed the results of the first film. Altogether I distributed twenty-four cameras to sixteen people, although it would almost be more accurate to say that twelve families participated: in many cases the cameras were shared either by a husband and wife or by several family members, but in all cases I have credited the work to the person or couple responsible for the camera. Nine women and seven men took part. The ages of the photographers ranged from twenty-two to seventy with an average age of thirty-four. The photographs were made between February and June of 1995.

As each batch of films were completed they were processed and the prints returned to the photographers. We discussed technical issues such as lighting and framing and I then recorded comments on each photograph which were for the most part given in Damara and later transcribed into English with the help of a translator. As far as possible, I let each author's narratives develop without too much direct prompting. I might ask: "Who are these people?" or "Why did you take this picture?": I wanted to avoid the temptation of pursuing my own narrow agenda in the hope that each individual photographer would elaborate his or her own motivations and interests. An unfocused discursive quality pervades the narratives which emerged. Discussion often took place in the context of a large family gathering where stories were told by and about the people depicted in the pictures - hilarity and jokes spilled over into serious considerations of the hardships of daily life; emotion and irony were intermingled in accounts of friends, family and personal histories. This viewing of the photographs became a social event in itself. The books of snap-shots from earlier films are often present in subsequent photos: the business of looking at themselves and each other through these photographs was active and ongoing.

## **The Photographs**

The editing of over 500 photographs for an exhibition required a similar process of dialogue. On the one hand this took place between me and each photographer as we discussed the various merits of each image in relation to its visual clarity and subject matter, on the other, during the final

selection process it became my own internal dialogue as I lived with the photographs and through them re-lived my relationships with the photographers themselves. Regardless of my intentions to present each photographer's work directly and unmediated, my subjectivity is inevitably manifest in the final result.

The construction of the exhibition was conceived as a compromise between the demands of displaying them in a public space and the constraints of placing the narrative content in the form of a book. Thirty-nine images were chosen to be enlarged and framed, based on their visual quality and clarity of subject matter. Again, this selection was made in consultation with the photographers, who in some cases left the final decision up to me. From the remaining images, I chose approximately 200 which together with their narratives conveyed the themes important to each photographer. In only a small number of cases have the images been cropped.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the cheap equipment and the photographers' previous lack of experience, many of the photographs are remarkable for their formal sophistication. A subtle low key personal quality runs through much of the work; at the same time one is struck by the sensitivity and directness of both the subjects and their photographic treatment. In contrast to many contemporary images of rural Africa, these do not portray an exotic 'other', nor are they angst ridden images of poverty or startlingly bizarre juxtapositions of colliding cultures. Neither do they depict the urban romance of unpeopled wildernesses which comprise so many contemporary images of Namibia. They are deeply embedded in and contextualized by the personal lives of their producers. While many of the photos fulfil our aesthetic expectations of what constitutes a 'good' composition, they also pose a critical counterpoint to the slick professional images which we have come to expect in a world awash with photographs.

The norms which organise our evaluation of photographs concern not only uncovering the meaningful intentions of the photographer, but placing this meaning within the context of the prevailing time - in it's aesthetic, political and cultural present. Postmodern critics such as Victor Burgin assert that the message, mood or feeling of a photo does not depend on

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<sup>2</sup> Two portraits made by Linda Axakhoe were cropped to accentuate the diamond shaped frames of the originals; two of Albert /Haseb's photos were enlarged and cropped in order to give definition to their subjects. In total nine photos were altered for similar reasons.



something individual and mysterious but rather on our common sense knowledge of typical representations of prevailing social facts and values: only through its position within an ongoing discourse can a photograph yield a meaningful impression (1982:41). "In other words, the photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the possibility of meaning" (Sekula 1982:91). But the reading of a photograph as text cannot be exhausted by reference to semiological systems of interpretation. The ability to perceive is born out of our subjective experience of a world which has common structural elements - vision is learned through imitation and affinity, bodily experience and memory (Sachs 1995:103-4).

Implicit to the entire process of how we see each other, is a continual negotiation of meaning across social and cultural space, involving transitions from the personal to the public, between rural and urban, periphery and centre, all mediated by images and informed by ideology (Appadurai 1986: 360).

By the end of the nineteenth century, black identities in South Africa were being shaped less by either indigenous or mission intentions than by the gathering forces of the colonial state. Whatever their local meanings, bodies, dress, and 'life-style' were made over into signs of gross difference; into the distinctions of race, gender, and culture by which Africans were being incorporated into the lowest reaches of a rising industrial society. (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 44)

Many of the photographs from Okombahe function as reminders of subjective experience, of emotional bonds which defy history, ciphers of memory which encapsulate subjective experience outside of time (Ingham 1996; Berger 1989). The exhibition is thus a medium through which to investigate the nature of representation (and photography), specifically in relation to the people of Okombahe but also as a reference to more general theoretical concerns. The title of the exhibition, *Matiba sida ra mûgu* (*How we see each other*), refers literally to the photographers but obviously has metaphorical connotations about fieldwork, anthropological accounts and representation generally.

The high point of the photo project was the opening night of the exhibition, held at the National Art Gallery of Namibia in the capital Windhoek. A chaotic mix of Namibian social and cultural worlds met here on equal terms: I shall never forget the surprise and excitement on the faces of the photographers as they confronted the images and narratives of their

personal lives in this distanced, genteel and sterile context - the safe mediated world of the urban art gallery. Issues of race, ethnicity, aesthetics, poverty, power and their representations were both implicit to the social occasion and explicitly reflected in the photographs themselves. This was one of the defining moments in a process which had initially been conceived of as an experiment in fieldwork methodology but which took on a momentum of its own when it entered the public arena as a collective representation of contemporary rural Namibian life. Many of the photographs consciously focus on social and economic issues, others are more closely concerned with personal relationships. They convey an honesty and creative playfulness in the expression of personal identity and sense of place in what might otherwise be seen as a fragmented, transitory and impoverished community. And while these images can be seen to be a product of a specific historical and cultural context they carry a resonance which speaks of and for the majority of Namibians today.

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# Matida Sida ra Mûgu (How we see each other)



**14 Photographers  
from Okombahe**

**February 24 - March 15, 1995**

**National Art Gallery of Namibia** 

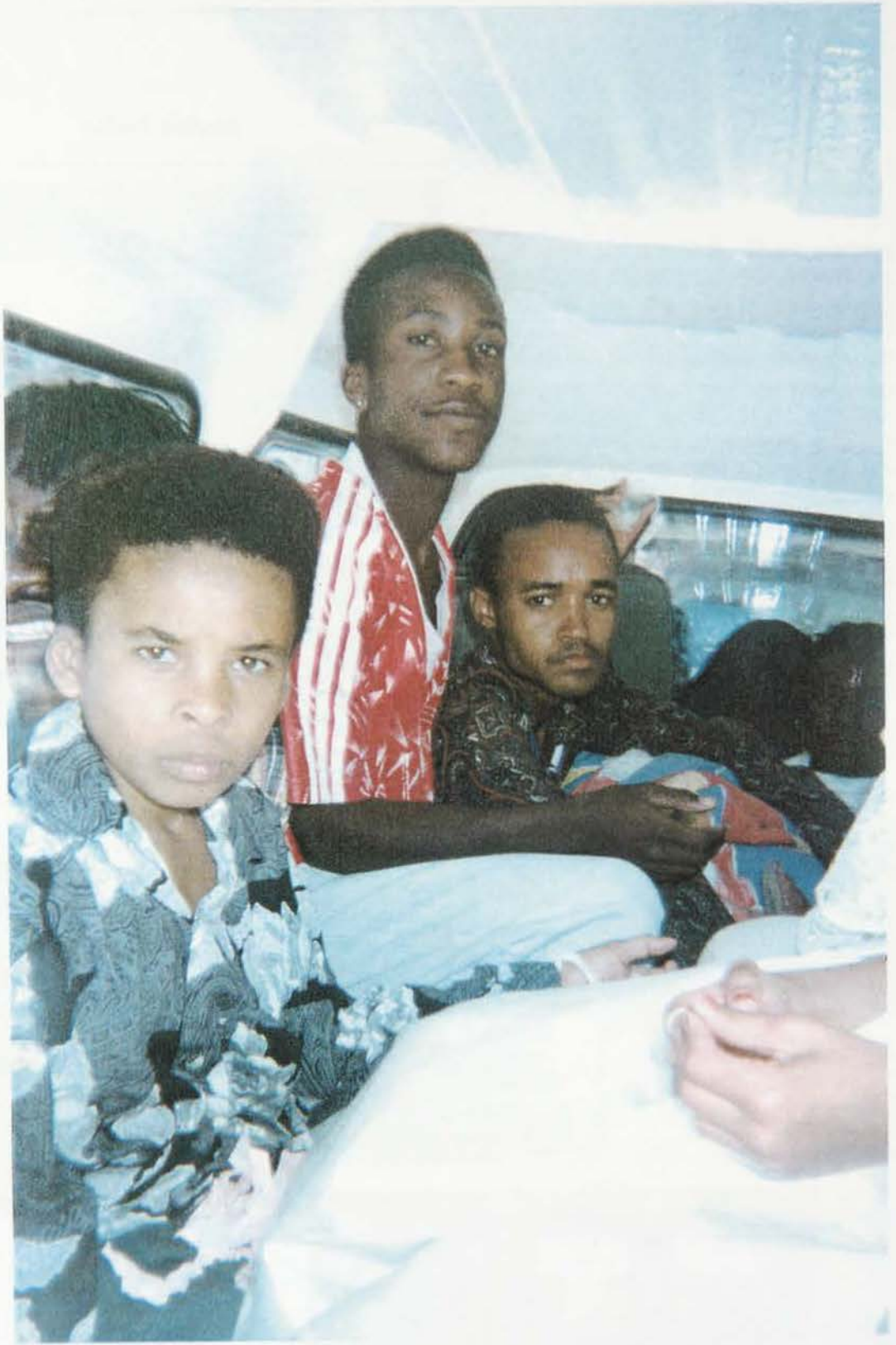
Presented by the National Art Gallery of Namibia and the Franco Namibian Cultural Centre





Albert /Haseb

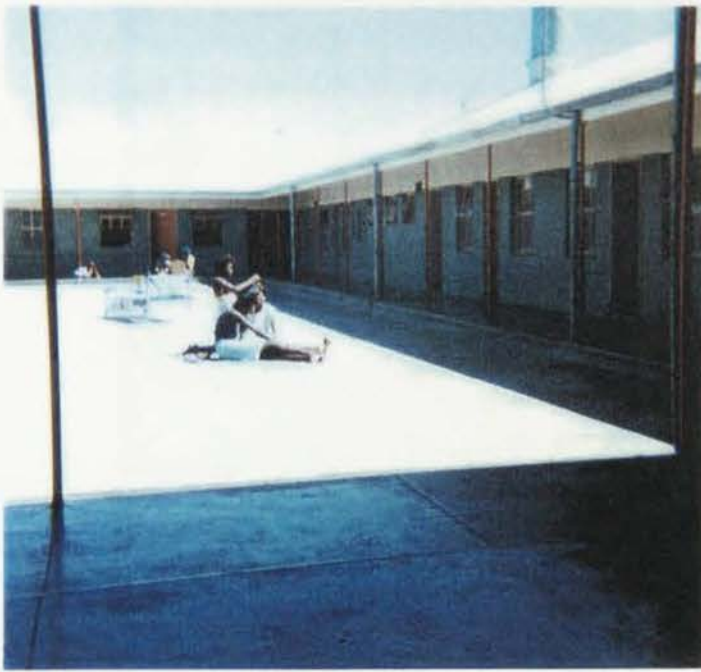
1. These guys were from a wedding, laying down enjoying themselves, drinking, singing in the back of the car.



Albert /Haseb

2. The same car full of the wedding party.





3. The girl's hostel. There are two halls for the girls; one is very clean. These are the elder girls, many have boy friends. This is the other hall, the girls are busy doing each other's hair and getting ready for school the next day. I just wondered, why is one hall so clean and the other not? You can see girls laying around, their beds are outside. They are just running after a nice time! Maybe they were having a long night and didn't feel like getting out of bed in the morning so they brought their beds outside to continue lying down.

4. In the washing room at Diabasen High. The guys are complaining about high paying hostel fees and having to bath in wash-hand basins. Why don't they repair the showers? Matambo from Omaruru is looking up at me. The naked guy at the back nearly flopped when he saw me with a camera.



5. The boys hostel. After their 'shower', they are sitting outside, singing and getting ready for lunch, wondering about what kind of food they will get today.







6. This guy is putting electricity into his house by connecting a supply from his neighbour. His name is 'Autsago' or 'Aobeb', a friendship name meaning "a person who gives".

7. These are the workers building the Agricultural Centre. They are just starting set the foundations. Two workers are from Sesfontein. I could tell from their dialect of Damara.

8. At the bottle store. This man is working there, putting on boxes of empty bottles, and as I was talking to him he was telling me a lot of shit, saying: "Last week I was asking you for a cigarette, after you had just been to the shop, and you told me you didn't have one, but I'm sure that is what you were buying in the shop, and today you have the nerve to ask me for one! Well, I don't have one and you can just go your way..." and so I just decided to take his picture. But he said "Don't take a picture of me again!" We call him Ou =Naeb which means either dove or loser.





9. This baby is one of triplets, but her two brothers died on the way to hospital in Omaruru. This is the mother (Alma but we call her Tamaties) and the father (Michael). I took this picture through the window. On the wall they have hung a few words which have been taken from the scriptures - can you see the pictures on the wall? Michael also painted the designs.



10. Michael's wife Tamaties inside their house: the outside of the house is build with tins, and the inside is covered in clay and cow shit. The embroidered cloth on the wall is another quote from the scriptures.

11. This is Massie, her son and Sylvia. I was eves-dropping on them while they were talking about me. Sylvia, my girl-friend who is pregnant with my child is saying: "If Albert leaves without telling me, I will take a cup and punish him on his head when he returns!" But Massie warned her: "You must be careful - see this child of mine - Where is his father today? He is no longer here".







12. Near the 'People's House. This old woman was cleaning and cooking, and I talked to her a little and quickly took the picture. The moment she saw me do that she became angry saying, "Why are you doing that? Maybe you are a spy!"



13. Then I asked her "What are you cooking in the pot? I am so hungry: could you please give me a little bit of maize meal, even just on a spoon?" Then she said "This is my pot, which I cooked for myself - go to hell!" An old man who was there beside her was also angry.

14. These kids are playing house - you can see the bed where one of them was sleeping, and one is cooking with sand in tins and another has a shop selling sugar, maize meal, soap fish tins and so on.





Albert /Haseb

15. Ouma Basaura (little batsau) and an old man ( I forgot his name) at the shop. The old man was collecting wood and Ouma Basauru was selling fat cookies, and they came together here from different directions.





Albert /Haseb

16. Michael is fixing a radio /tape machine.

17. Telling a nice story and laughing. Ben and a friend of mine from Otjiwarango called Kasubi (shorty).



19. At the bottle store. A relative sister of mine, Tilas who lives in Windhoek. Friends sitting in the shade telling each other old stories and new stories, about boy-friends and many people which they all know.

18. Tiakodle and Size. Tiakodle is a joker who will say something to you to make you angry, then something to cool you down again, he is that type of man. Tiakodle is the name of a famous soccer player, so he called himself that. We call this one Size because he is so fat. You can see how red their eyes are, from drinking the day before.







20. Nobel's brother-in-law Baseth is singing the music of Michael Owos-oab. The song is about the football game when the Kaiser Chiefs took the cup for black Africa. The woman is a relative of mine, named /Obes (beggar), and she was busy drinking the pocket of this man, telling him, "there is no liquor, what should we do now?" To which he will reply, "Don't worry, I will get some and we can share love", then she will say, "Then you must buy a little more liquor", which they do...



21. Nobel's place: Erwin is drunk and Nobel's small son Pukkie is playing in the back of the car. Erwin is singing along with the guy in front about black Africa saying "Yeh, take the cup!"

22. This guy takes care of Damara's house, the school teacher who lives near me in Blaubeerg. He didn't believe that my camera was real, or took good pictures. I asked him for a cigarette, and after he gave me one, I decided to take a picture of him. He couldn't believe that the first photo would come out, and as he was rewinding a tape I asked him for another cigarette, and he said, "What? From this packet? It is finished, man. I paid for this alone!"



23. This guy came to my house on Sunday morning. He accused me of chasing his girl friend the night before, but he only heard this from someone, and he got my name wrong, so I told him he was wrong and to go and look for that guy somewhere else. But he was still busy saying to me that next time he won't waste time talking, he will just start fighting. I don't know his name, but his girl-friend works at the bottle store and is very pregnant.



24. These two guys were coming from Michael's house, dancing, dancing, singing.





Albert /Haseb

25. Looking into the bottle store. The old lady in front is called Skattelay (Always disaster). She is arguing with the owner of the bottle store saying "Why should this other old lady get Zorba (a type of liquor)? Why can't I get? Both of us are old ladies, and both of us will pay the moment we get our pensions, so what kind of difference are you making between us? I must get that Zorba. otherwise I will



Christine Maletsky

1. I took this picture to show how we teach the children in the kindergarten how to use a toilet. In the past, there were no toilets, and the children would run to the bush, hide under trees and squat down there. I was teaching Pala and Katherine how to use the toilet when I took this picture - they were surprised and shy.



2. This woman is helping her mother; it is the /Narin household and they are my neighbours. It is Saturday morning and they are cleaning the area around their house of rubbish. Since there is no rubbish bin it is piled up in one place so that anyone who wants to, can pick through it for something that might have a little value.



3. These two are my neighbours. In this picture they are returning home with fire wood and their dog which also follows them. If there is no wood, then there is no life at home, so you must go collect it in the veld before you can cook. Sometimes you can be so hungry and there is nothing for the fire and you must go a long way to find good dead wood: it takes a long time. Sometimes you can hurt yourself when breaking off dead branches.

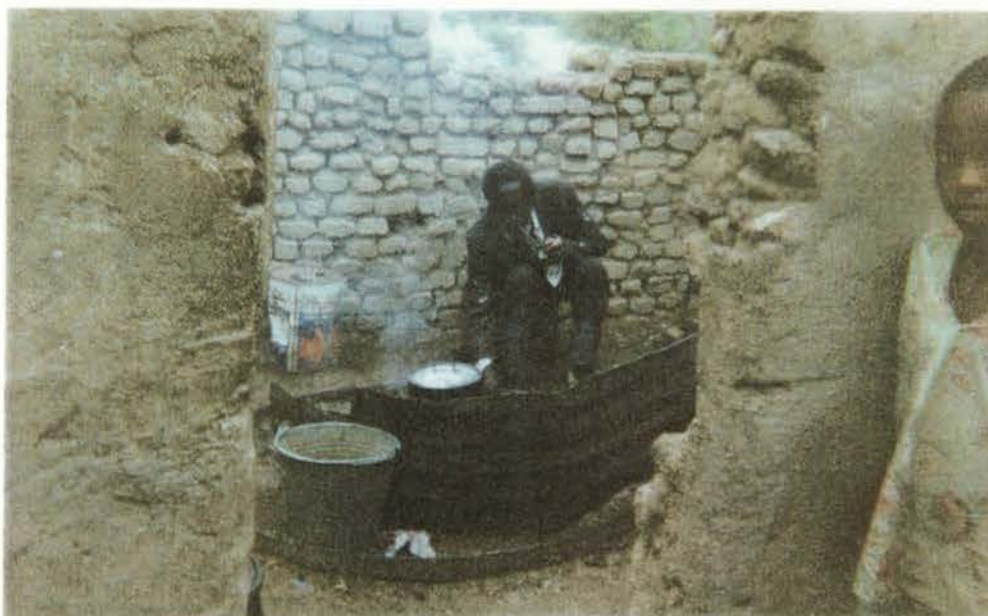


4. This is the kindergarten where I work. I didn't plan to pose this picture, but when the children saw me with the camera they all sat down and looked at me, so I just took their picture.





5. This man is a 'one-liner' called !Guri-haseb. He always stays alone, without a woman or even grandchildren. He is living through his garden. He is always clean and tidy and in his house you will never find anything dirty. The reason I came here was that I wanted to taste one of his garden fruits. It was in the night and as I entered his house he was tuning the radio. He started to explain something to me like this: "Do you know that your life-time is in your own two hands?" He pointed to his hand and said "your money is here: if you know how to use your hands you will never be hungry. He is the sort of man who will not depend on others.



6. This is Gideon, my grandfather in my mother's kitchen. He is sitting in the smoke, trying to make the fire hot so that the water will boil for coffee. He isn't worried about the smoke, in fact he is also smoking his pipe. My younger brother Dion forced himself into the picture.





7. It is Sunday morning and my mother and I are preparing to go to church. We must wash ourselves, but since we don't have a bathroom we must wash in a basin of hot water. Here my mother is throwing the bath water away, while her grandchildren watch.



8. Our parents and grandparents are teaching us how to survive if there is no food by collecting food from the veld. Here my mother is preparing some veld food, bosui, to make bread. It is grass seed gathered from ants' nests and it must be cleaned of stones, sand and husks. This is done in two stages by first removing the course material and then separating out the different kinds of seeds. The chickens are just standing there waiting for the waste to be thrown away. When this is baked like bread, it has a nutty taste. Sometimes we also fry it in a little oil and this also tastes good.



9. If you grew up on a farm, you would be interested in this picture. It has been very dry and the horses are thin. The day was nice, cool and cloudy, and because of this I thought it would make a nice photograph. The horses stopped to watch me, but the owner, who was just behind them didn't want to be in the picture.



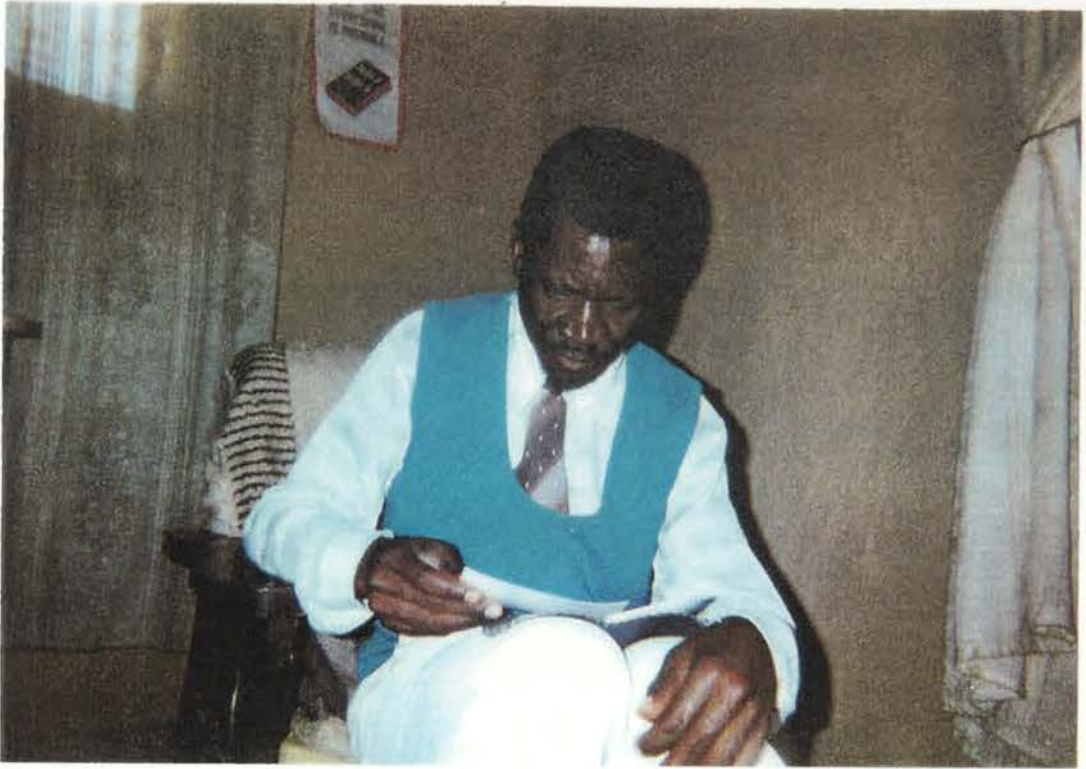
10. My sister took this picture of me and the children. I wrapped a blanket around myself and am busy preparing coffee.



11. It is cold in the morning but the children are enjoying themselves by the fire. They aren't worried about having warm cloths, but just get up quickly, help me make the fire and wait for some warm coffee.

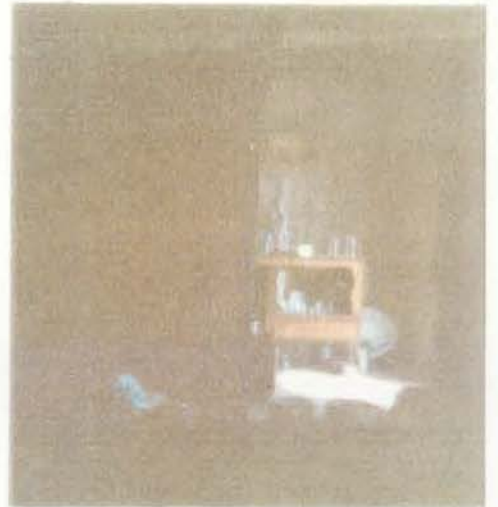
12. This is my only surviving grandmother, Maro Fistos (mother's small sister Fistos). She came to our house and asked for a little sugar; there is no-one else whom she can ask. We are the only people who will take care of her, although she also looks after one of her grand daughters who stays with her.





13. Ou Mika is my neighbour and advisor. He is looking at my wedding photographs. Whenever I have problems in life, he helps me talk them out. My father is dead and my mother is alone.

14. This small cupboard contains glasses and other things which were my wedding gifts. Someday, if I get a better life, I will give them to my mother or my sister - then I will remember that day I was praying and I started with this, now look what I have.



15. My husband took this picture of my sister braiding my hair. White people, they have long hair and they don't know what its like for us. We use panty hose to tie the ends of the braids together.





Christine Maletsky

16. Muenda is my good friend. She is visiting me and telling a story. I wanted to have a picture of her. [Muenda is a Herero name meaning 'visitor']



Christine Maletsky

17. My uncle's kitchen. He is preparing some coffee for me. This cigarette won't leave his mouth - "His life is there, without it he will feel alone".







19. This is the cat my uncle was calling. He will sell these bottles at the bottle store and buy more sugar for brewing tambo. Each bottle brings 10 cents.

20. This is another relative. After my uncle gave him one glass of tambo, he started helping so that he would get more: so in that way they are helping each other.

21. Enjoying tambo -don't disturb!



18. Our fathers, and even our husbands are not always able to just go buy cigarettes at the shop - there is not so much money for that. They buy tobacco and roll it in newspaper. My uncle is lighting his cigarette with wood from the fire - matches are not needed because the fire is there and it is easy.

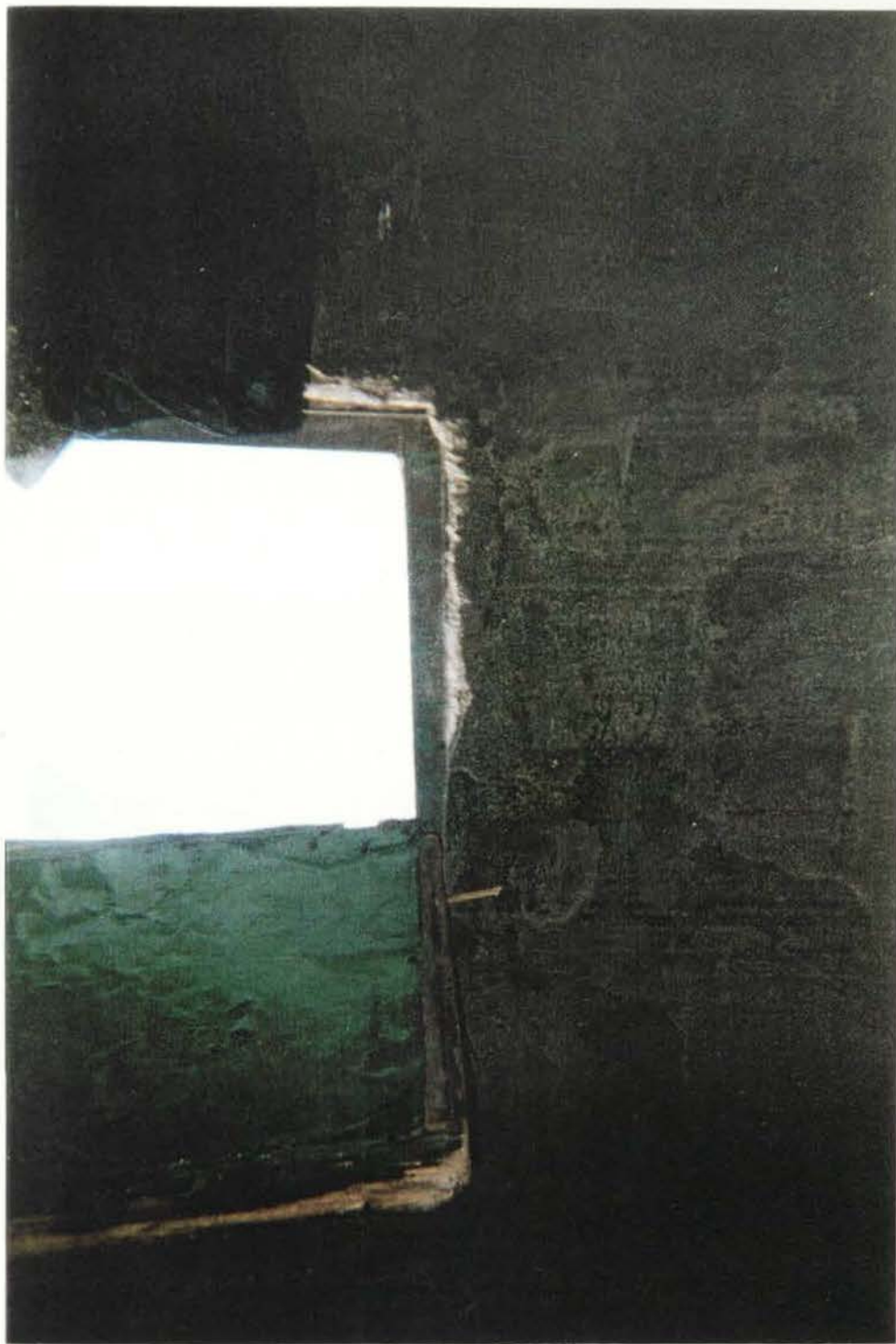






Christine Maletsky

22. This is my mother's father, the only grandfather left alive. The old people have many problems. His pension money didn't come for several months so he collected empty bottles to sell and here he is tying them in a bag. His father was a German and his mother was a Damara woman. Those Germans who came during the war were making babies with the Damara ladies and that is how he was born - that's why he is lighter than us.



Christine Maletsky

23. I took this picture so that I can remember, someday when I am standing on my own feet and having a good life - when I am sitting down on my own chair, in a nice house built with bricks and proper windows - I will remember that once I stayed in a house like this one. Even if I close this window, it will sometimes fly open in the night waking me and giving me a fright. Even if I put up a curtain it just blows up and doesn't help at all.



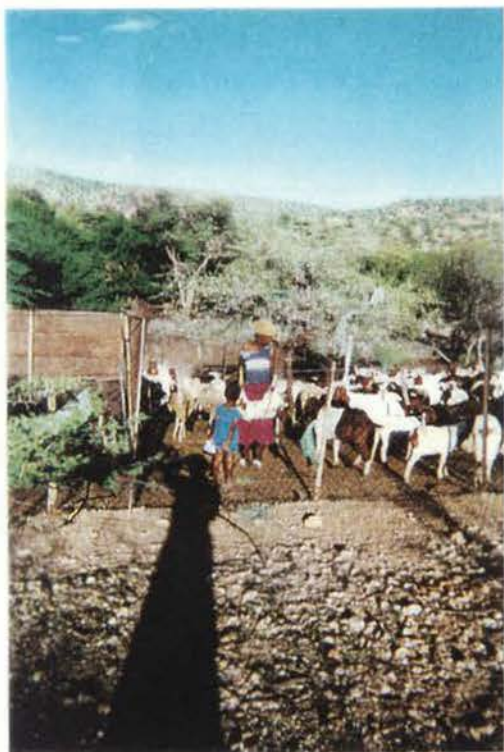
1. It was a cold morning and I was busy to make breakfast. The fire is beginning to burn and I am putting the pot on for tea water.



2. Queenie is drinking tea.



3. Before leaving for the veld we are checking the stock so that we can keep back any which might give birth that day.



4. This is one of the small lambs which I have marked on its ear. I was showing Queenie how to catch them.

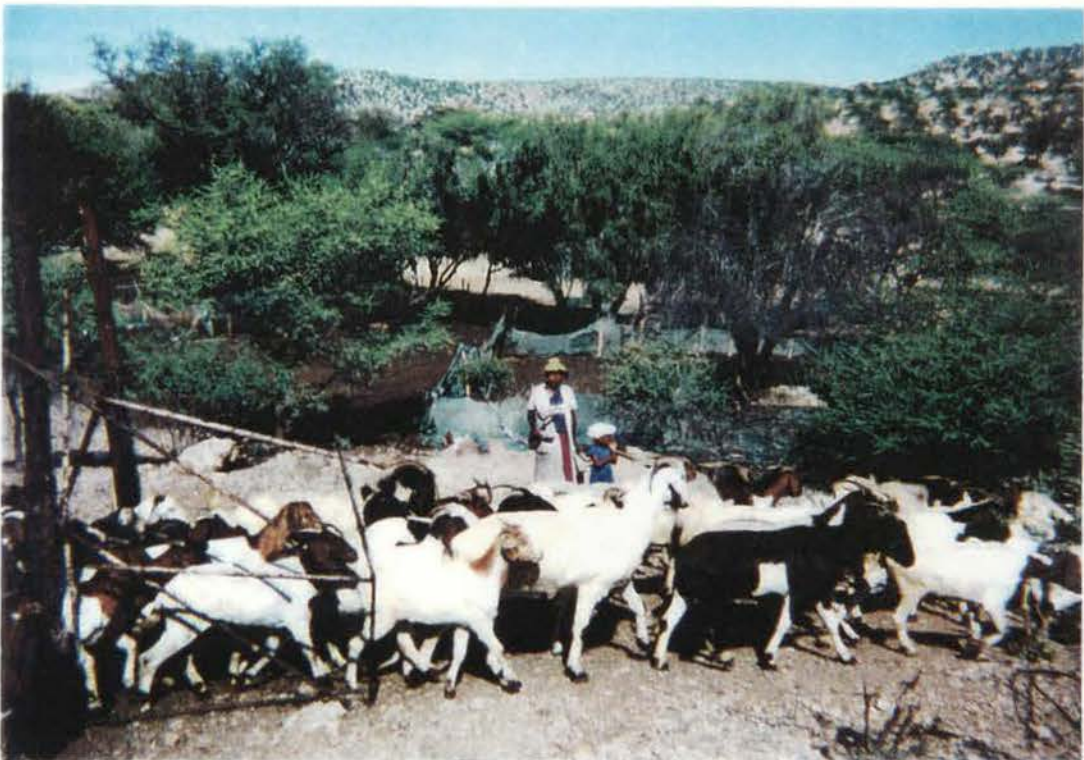






5. Queenie is helping Willemina milk the goats early in the morning.

6. Willemina and Queenie are all ready for a day in the veld. She has her panga and they are protected from the sun.







7. I am in the veld only 2 or 3 weeks after the rain started. It is already turning green - I am so happy and am looking fat myself.

8. In the veld.

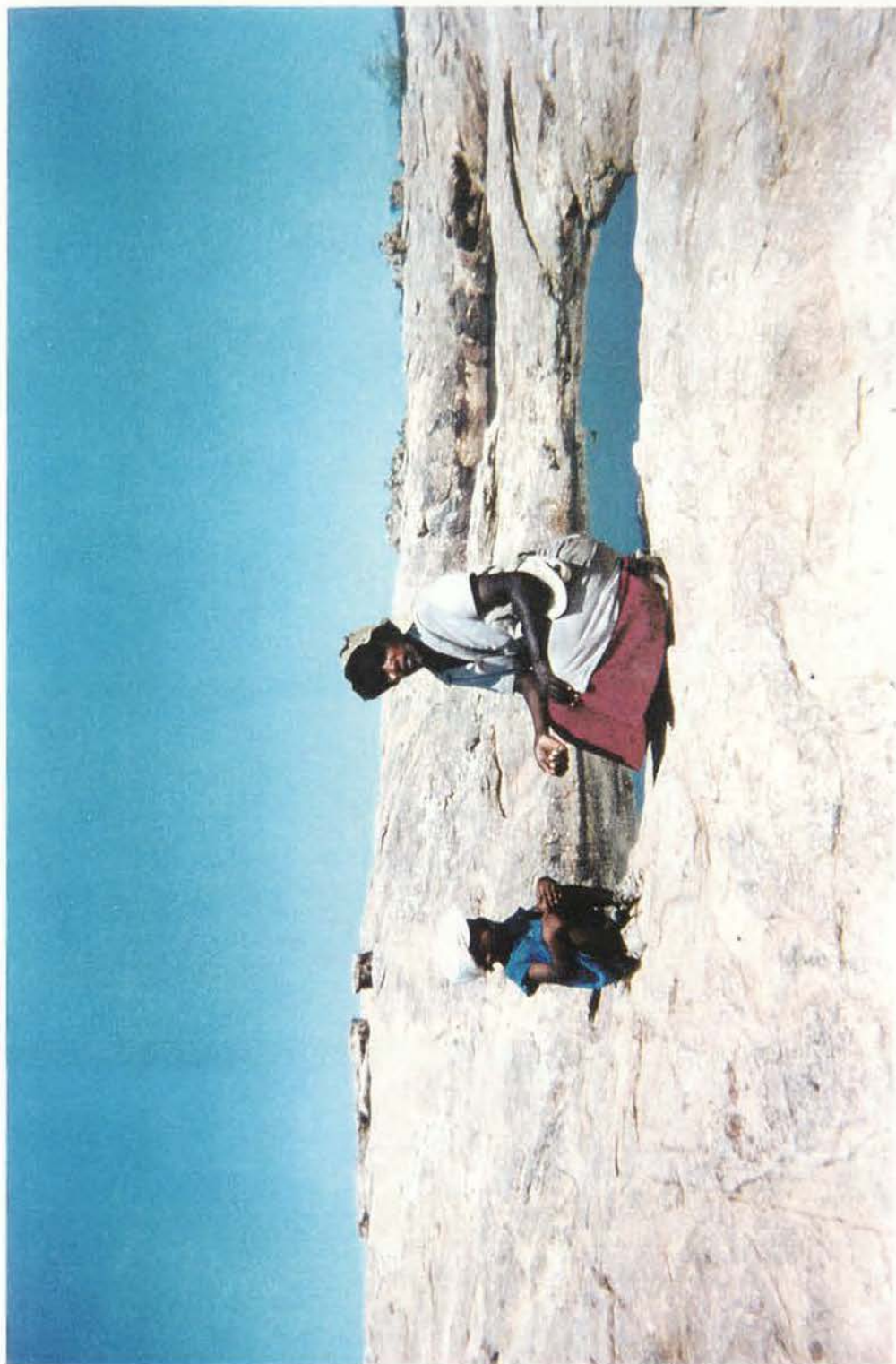




Willemina Hoeses

9. After the rains came, the river flowed and filled our well with sand, so there is no water for the goats and sheep at home, but in the veld, we know the places with pools and we are taking our stock there to drink.





Willem Hoeseb

10. Willemina is waiting for the stock to come to this pool in the veld. When they finish drinking she must take them home so that they don't wander in the wrong direction.



11. It is nice for Willem to be with his young rams.



12. After the rain, the veld flowers are blooming and it is a very nice place.



13. Coming home.



14. I was very very happy with one of my rams -he has died now but he was chief, and left many good off-spring. I am giving him my hat in this photo!



15. Today Willem must take me to Okombahe so I can catch a lift to Omaruru. I plan to call my family in Khorixas to let them know we are all fine and to hear their news. It has been a long time since I have seen my people there.



16. Going to see a dealer about selling my goats later this year.



17. Queenie

18. Early in the morning Willemina and Queenie are warming themselves in the sun behind our house.







Willem Hoeseb

20. Willemmina and Queenie are going by donkey cart to collect the drought fodder in Okombahe. The donkeys are wanting to run!



Lucia /Goagases

1. Ignatious and the daughter of my girl who works at the take-away. These are grandchildren who stay in Okombahe.





2. We are preparing tsau - It took us one day to collect all these seeds, we went by donkey cart far in the veld to find this.

3. This is me but it looks as if I am drunk - I don't remember who took this picture.



4. Tekla and Ananias our goat herder, dancing (/gais).





5. These are two of my grandchildren - one lives in Okahanja with her mother, the other (Didi) in Swakopmund.



6. My husband Johannes.



7. Augustinus and his wife are our neighbours. They are milking their cows. They sometimes sell their milk, or give it to relatives.



9. Johannes and Khotat, the men of our place.







Tekla /Goagoses

1. Portrait in the river. Tekla,  
Flora, Angelika and Si=khaio



Tekla /Goagoses

2. My father, Johannes and Uncle Martin.





3. Myself, Angelika and her child  
This was taken in the first garden  
which we made in this place.  
want to remember how proud  
am of it now.

4. These are my nieces and  
nephews. It makes me think o  
my two sister's husbands who are  
now dead.







5. This is my uncle Martin. I took this because until now we don't have any photos of him.



6. Angelika



7. This is my husband my sister in law and my nephew at our home in Jansen. Most of the photos from this film are pictures of my family - I have never had a chance to have their photographs before now.



8. This is our neighbour from across the river. When I saw him standing beside the donkey cart it looked so nice to me. I took this picture so that one day when he is gone, I can remember: this is Polis who was my neighbour. He is an Ovambo speaking guy.





9. This is Angela who is also my grandmother with two of her grandchildren. If someone ever asks about any of King David Goreseb's children, I can show them this picture of his first born.

10. This is my grandmother Fistolene and my brother's son. I took this to show my grandchildren how my grandmother looked.





11. This is our traditional dancing 'gais'. Some people are dancing without clothing but here we are just demonstrating: Ananias our worker is wearing a loin cloth in front and back and I am shaking a tin rattle.

12. Lucia took this picture so that I could fool you into thinking that I also own a radio - if someone asks you, tell them it is mine! But it really belongs to Lucia.



13. This is my father, Johannes: he always laughs. Our family is scattered all over Namibia, so if some of them come here someday after his death, I can show them this picture of my father.







14. & 15. I took these pictures just to show foreign people how we use the veld food tsaui (grass-seeds gathered from ants nests). Some people use tsaui to make tambo, others cook it to eat like maize meal. I learned to gather tsaui from my mother and father when I was small, as we often gathered and ate it. It can be cooked with milk or without milk by pounding it and frying it in a pan with oil. The ants are biting us when we collect tsaui; sometimes there are also snakes in the ants nests. This is how the tsaui is cleaned - first we winnow out the stones and then the sand. We have now stored some of this our house.



16. Khotat is preparing honey. First of all, after taking the honey combs from the bees' nest, we are preparing it in hot water. Then we have to press out the raw honey from the combs and put this sweet liquid with the tambo and then it makes a very tasty and strong drink.



17. This is how I am milking our goats.



Tekla /Goagoses

18. My family - we took this just to show the people how beautiful our river is looking. You can see the big green Ana trees in the background, and the sky was full of nice clouds.





Christolene Goses

1. My husband is the owner and main character of the house. I wanted a picture of him so that people would know how he is living; that he is farming with goats and has a dog. I put the tape machine there to make the picture even nicer.



2. (Bernardo) This picture shows how I make my business, in order to have a little food in my house. I have a horse cart with which I go to the bush and cut wood. You can see the weapon with which I cut it - an axe. I sell it in Okombahe. Some people pay me by account at the end of the month. If I make the cart full, I can ask \$N20. Asi made this picture - the two guys are friends who help me to load and unload the wood. This is also a story about water problems: whenever I go away from our farm, I take 2 twenty litre plastic containers to bring back water from bore-holes along the way back to my house.



3. This is my friend Gerson at an old mine near Pawkwab. It was last used to provide gravel to make the bridges on the main Uis road and this is where it was loaded onto the lorries.



4. & 5. This is an old spring where our ancestors took their water. Later on, miners made it into a deep well. It is an interesting old place.







6. The moment I saw this boy riding towards my house I wanted to take a photo of him in the green veld, it looked so nice - another day I will remember that our people were riding donkeys like this.



7. Milking goats is usually work for women. Here I am showing my man how to milk, so when I am not here and he wants some milk, he knows how to do it. He must hold the goat with one hand, put the cup down like that and milk the goat with the other hand, which he is doing in this picture.



8. This is a picture of the showing how the children do some small jobs, they are separating the kids from their mothers, which is done each evening. Mapere, Desmond, Bianca, Maureen (Hos). The name Hos comes from when she was a baby and her parents were whispering 'hos, hos, hos' to make her quiet.



9. We visited Bernardo's family near the Brandberg. This man is making a donkey cart for me and Bernardo. Now it is nearly finished- the sheet metal body must be bolted onto the frame. The maker is called /Unob, which in English means 'nameless' maybe because he was the kind of guy who always refused to tell anyone his real name. He is not a relation and only just moved to Arix Ams.



10. Ouma Lydia and Sydney. This is how an old Damara lady gets up in the morning: she milks the goats, makes porridge for the grandchildren, feeds the dogs and then lights her pipe.



11. /Uno's wife near her new house and kraal. She refused to let me take a picture of her up close, but I decided that the place was nice and that I wanted a picture showing how the house was made and how far it is from their kraal.





12. & 13 This is my friend Lydia and her son Sydney at Arix Ams near Uis. I wanted to take a picture of her outside her house but she said: "I want you to take a photo of us in my own house, even if it is bad and I haven't got anything. Other people can see the kind of places in which the Damara people are living.





14. Red Pepper. This is my mother's garden in Okombahe. We grow these red peppers and other food too. This is my mother's brother, Secatius. I gave him this job to pick the ripe peppers so that he should dry them and save them for me. Sometime, I will go to travel somewhere, like Walwis Bay, then I can sell them in the township. This is our life.



15. Do you know what this is? It is an abas (gourd used for making sour milk). My mother (who is standing here with her hired helper) plants them in the garden. If they grow up and are plentiful she will have many goats from them. Before, a goat was worth 60 rand and she could trade one abas for a small goat. Then, the price of goats was not so high, before the auctions came to Okombahe. Now, if she gives two abas she will easily get one goat in return, maybe a young goat ready to breed. She is taking them from the garden to her house where she will dry and clean them and then they will be ready to sell.

16. These are my parents who are developing themselves and living through their garden - that is why I made this picture of them in their garden.



17. This is the same: Secatius is picking ripe red peppers and the other man is digging crops.

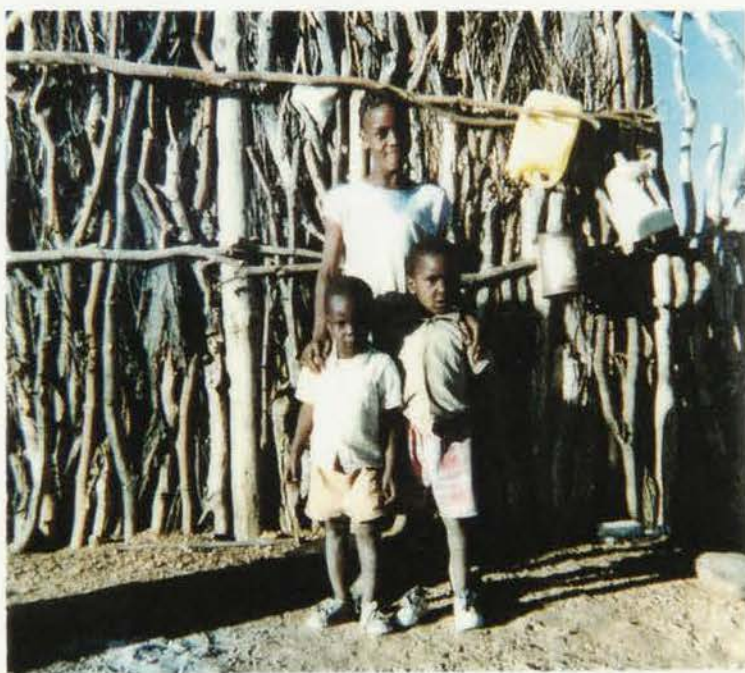




18. (Bernardo) When I was delivering wood, one of my customers took this picture of me standing with my horse.



19. Bernardo was just leaving on his horse to trek cattle with some other men to David Wes. Because of this work we are able to eat through this time of struggle.

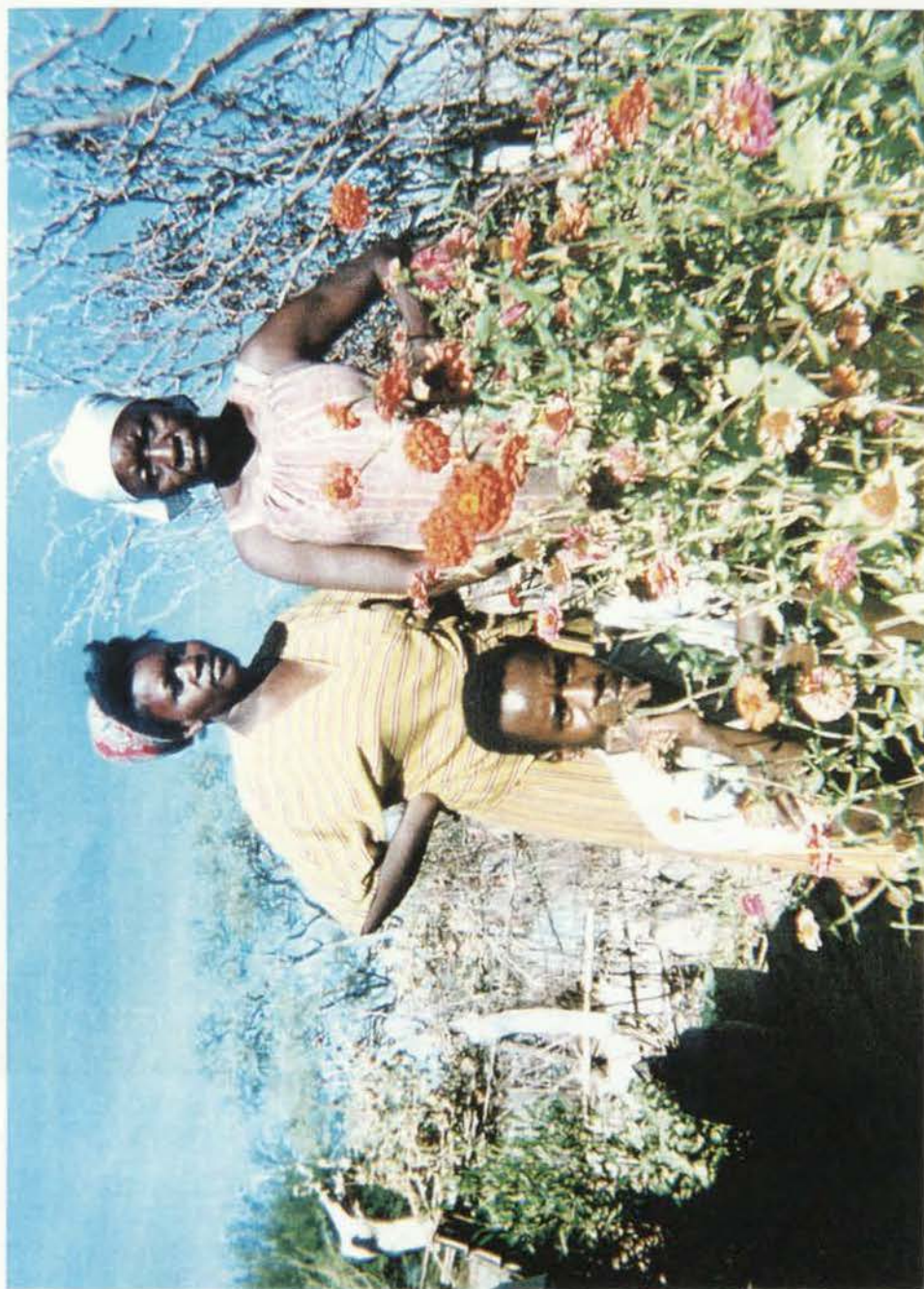


20. My sister Salonica's children at their post in Heinz. I want people to know I have a great family.



21. These two guys in the front are my relatives. They are very naughty, but in fact, we understand each other, or at least, I understand them. They will punish someone, I can say they are 'beaters' - tough guys. All of them are problems, but I made a picture of them the moment they came to visit me. That was the day I was giving them advice about their trouble-making, and I took their picture in case one day they are missing or lost because of their crimes, I should remember what they looked like. After I gave them advice, they agreed to mend their ways, and recently, I haven't heard that they have been causing trouble, so maybe they are cooling down now.





22. Bernardo's Makais (big mother), Magdalena with her children Gisella and Gersom. This family is making money only from the poka (alcohol) which Magdalena distills from tsau - this provides all the income for the family's food.



Diana Gawanges

1. Rosa, Roxette and Lotte at the restaurant. I was just going to buy some cigarettes.



2. My mother is washing clothes in our yard. She is always complaining about aches in her legs, but when she washes she won't sit down and later she will complain - I took this picture to show her why her body aches.



4. This man was fighting with his wife. I took this picture the moment his wife fell down on top of my mother. The fight was about beer - the man didn't want his wife to drink, although he was drinking himself; he was selfish.

3. This was a terrible day! The children dug up the sweet potatoes and when my father came home he was so angry with them - here he is trying to re-plant them and his grand daughter is helping him to dig holes.







5. Ben, Lucky, Alo and Theo were standing around outside the restaurant in the afternoon smoking. The difference between smokers and drinkers is that smokers stand around in groups and talk, while drinkers sit separately and watch the scene or quarrel.



6. Drying onions at Michael's shop. They were grown in the Rossing garden project. One woman wanted a hike from the gardeners so she decided to help them.



7. Today, my mother killed a chicken and the children are plucking it. As they were doing this, another chicken was looking at what was happening and this struck me as tragic and funny.



8. These are the women who cook the food for the old people. They were giving some soup and fat cookies to a man who turned up early and was begging.

9. In the mornings, old people line up at the Lutheran church for their daily food ration. They were pushing each other to get their place in line while one old woman was barking orders saying: 'Stand still! Wait your turn!'.





Erwin Tsuseb

1. Girl friend, Okombahe





2 & 3. Drought food relief distribution, 'Peoples' House' Okombahe.





4, 5 & 6. The village square in Okombahe: girls netball team.





Christian Uiseb

1. It is in the morning at my neighbour's house. This woman is cooking pumpkins for her husband and her family. Her husband works with me in the garden and soon he will come home to eat his lunch.





Christian Uiseb

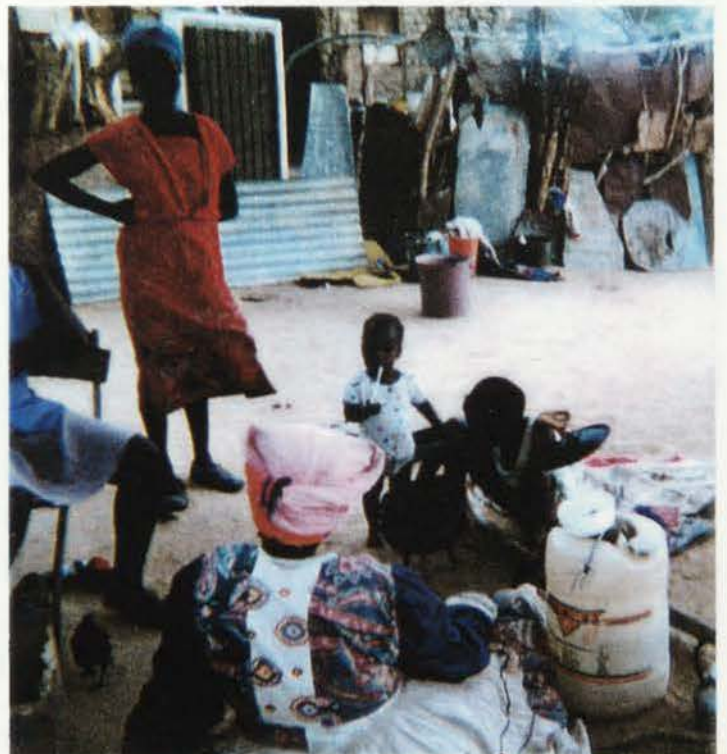
2. This man is a 'one-liner' always staying alone. He has no relatives staying at his house and no relatives with whom he can stay. He is busy weeding his garden. His name in Damara is /Awareb which, translated into English, would be 'Rubbish Master'. It is a home-name from his childhood, but now he is old and his friends sometimes call him that which makes him angry





3. This woman was preparing pumpkins in the pot, and she was somewhat under the influence of liquor. She was talking to herself and I became interested in her story: she had been arguing with her husband about the strength of the tambo and he said: "It was just a shi drink!" but she replied "Ai! It was a nice drink that I had", and so on...

4. This woman had finished cooking her pumpkin, and at mid-day, her children returned from school and they were very hungry. As their mother was in the house when they arrived, they just ate the whole pot of pumpkin. Even the older daughter who came later didn't get any, that is why her mouth is like that - she is still angry her younger brothers who 'chopped' the whole pumpkin. Their mother was also angry, but she just sat down there, seeing there was nothing she could do.







5. Dadi (which literally means: my father) is an Ovambo-speaking old man and he is perfectly drunk. His wife has forced him to go down and water the garden with the hand pump but he was saying to himself: "Why should I do this? Why don't my children come and water the garden? I am the man of the house, so I should give the orders, and should not be bossed around by others..." and so on.



6. Walter is transplanting pau-pau plants. He had run out of tobacco, and he didn't want to ask for any, so he just dropped everything and went to the garden to work to take his mind off tobacco.

7. Eric is one of Mike's workers in the garden. Here he is weeding, but also drinking tambo - he's hidden his bottle on the far side of the tree so that if Mike comes by he won't see it.



8. This man was weeding in his garden. Someone called him to come and drink some ginger beer, and as he looked up I took this picture.



9. This man is known as 'Khaireb' (warthog). He was disappointed with his girl friend and was standing there alone arguing with himself. As I took this picture he began to quarrel with me saying: "Why must you take a picture of me now? Can't you see I'm in a dirty shirt, dirty trousers - why didn't you tell me so I could wear some clean clothes?" He was also drunk.



10. In this donkey cart there was stolen sheep meat. The police officer's car was standing in front of the donkey cart. Two other men were standing and quarrelling with the police officers saying: "What right have you to stop us like that? We have done nothing wrong". The man in the picture is looking depressed, because he is thinking "Now we will all go to jail!" Also, he had beaten the donkeys very hard in trying to make them run faster to avoid the police and they are bleeding so he is wondering what he will tell his mother happened to the donkeys. They argued with the police for a long time, but in the end the police didn't have enough evidence to show that the meat was stolen. The three maintained their innocence throughout, arguing that since they were farming themselves, why shouldn't they slaughter one of their one animals if they wanted to.



11. 'Mibagu' (told each other) was pumping petrol for this man but she put just a little more petrol in the car than the man had asked for... so they are arguing about the payment. He was drunk.







12. This woman is pregnant and the girl in the foreground is her grand daughter. The pregnant woman has been told not to drink before she has given birth but she is just coming back from the shabeen. 'Why can't you wait till I have given birth to my baby, before you take my picture?'. The grandchild has covered her face because she doesn't want her photo taken.

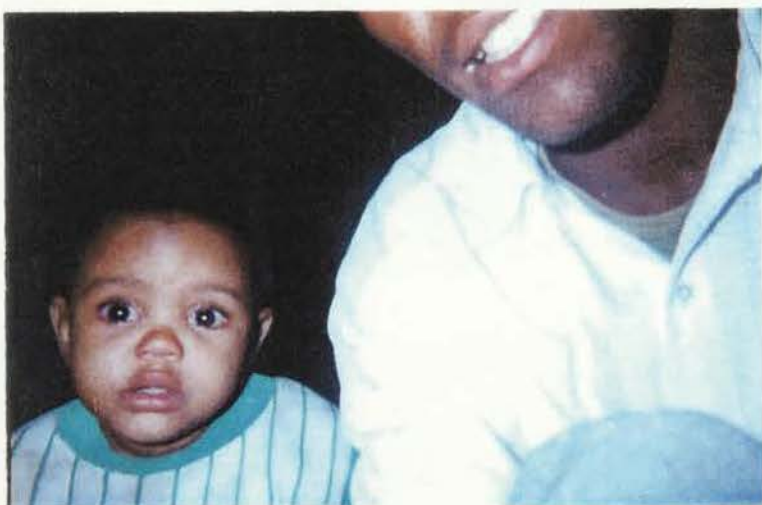


13. This woman is drinking tambo which was given to her by this man. He is proposing to her, saying quietly, "after you have finished that we should go to my house and share love together". This is true! The final proposal was for him to buy just one more, then they should go, but the plan failed when this woman's husband arrived shortly after.



14. It is the end of the month and Oan !Gas (slave of everyone) has just bought some groceries at the shop. The moment I photographed her she was dancing and singing: "Oh, now I have enough money - first I was hungry, but now I have my salary and am happy!"

15. My little niece, Patricia, had just arrived at my house in Okombahe. She had been taken from her mother's place at Martin Luther High school by my in-laws without the mother's permission. When my in-laws arrived they began to quarrel and fight so I held Patricia to comfort her.

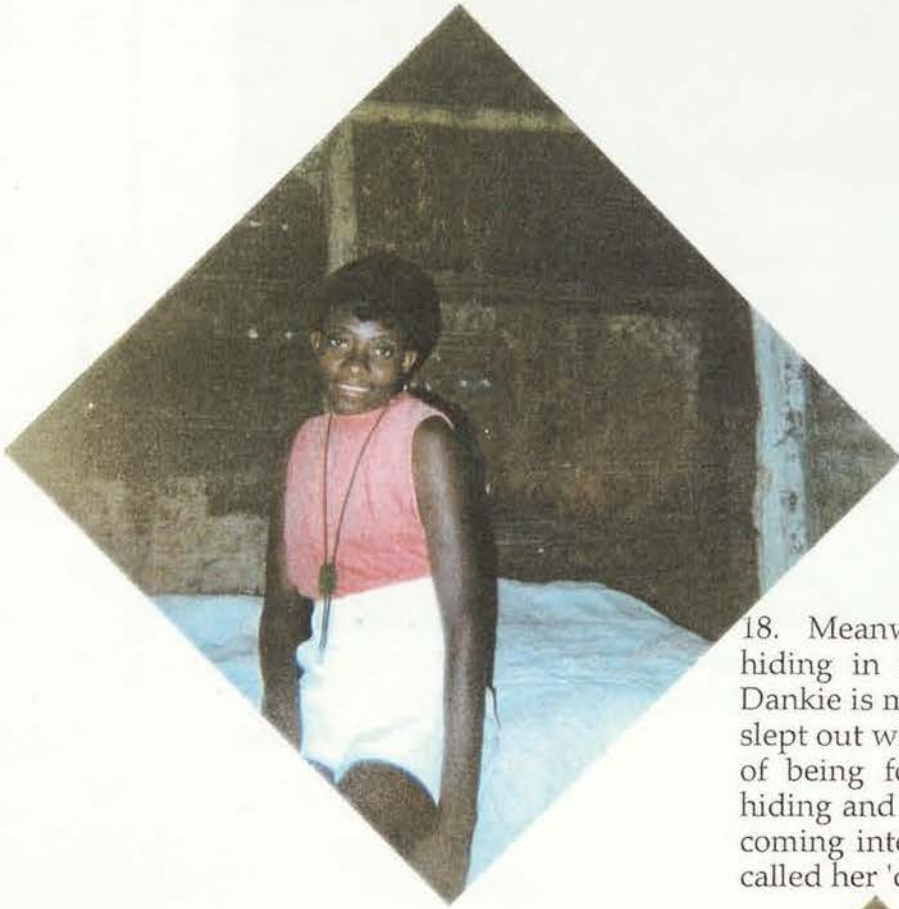


16. Later, I was listening to the girls who had brought a bottle of stolen liquor to my house. We were drinking and I was concentrating on their story of how the bottle was stolen.

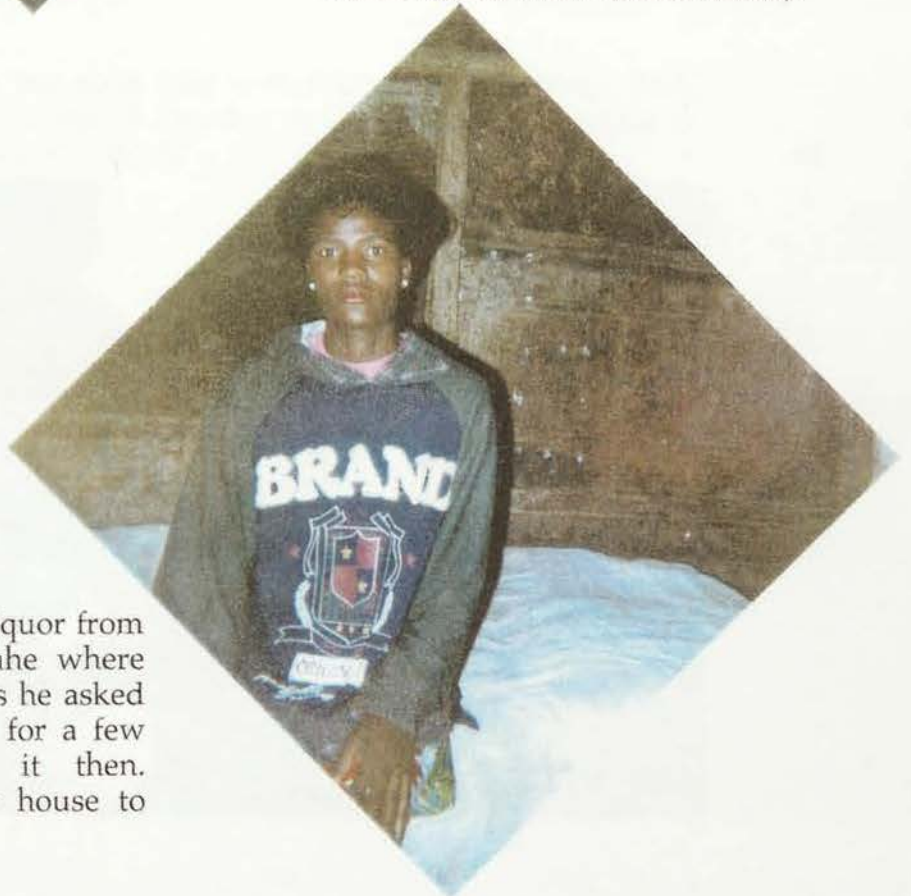
17. Sandra, my girl friend, was resting after having come to help my family prepare food for Patricia's christening.







18. Meanwhile, Dankie and Elsie were hiding in my house for other reasons: Dankie is my friend's girl but she had just slept out with another guy and was afraid of being found out. So now she was hiding and wanted to talk to me and kept coming into my room; my sister jokingly called her 'di / uisa' (sister in law).



19. Elsie stole a bottle of liquor from a drankwinkel in Okombahe where her brother works. Perhaps he asked her to look after the shop for a few minutes and she stole it then. Anyway, she came to my house to hide, and drink.



20. At first, Dankie and Elsie were discussing their various adventures and problems and looking for advice,

21. but soon they were joking and laughing. Both are in school together in Okombahe, but Dankie is from Windhoek.







22. This older woman is hogging the bottle and I said to her "Liquor won't pay for your funeral, we are the ones who will give you a good burial, so if you won't let us drink, go to hell, I will find my own liquor to share with my friends."



23. My girl friend Sandra is quarrelling with me; I was tired, drunk and laying down on my bed. She said: "If you drink any more I will take my belongings and leave you right now".



24. But then my sister cooled her down and took this picture.

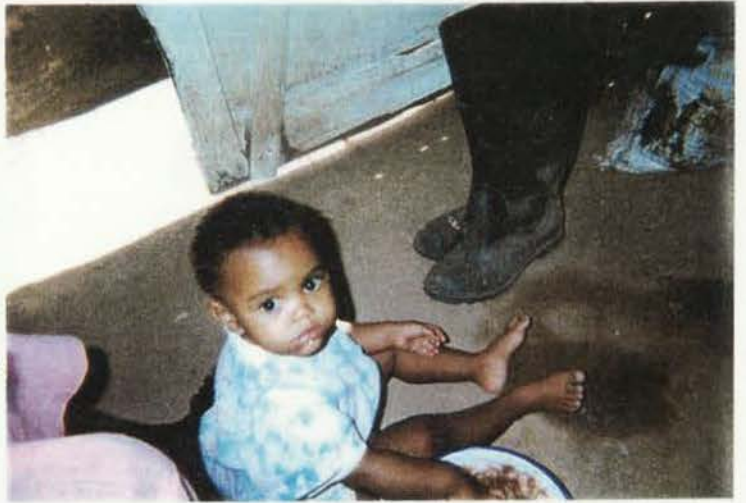


25. Early the next morning, a neighbour was passing by but stopped to ask for food since she was hungry. My mother told her to make a fire and cook the mealy meal, but the woman was grumbling at all this extra work.

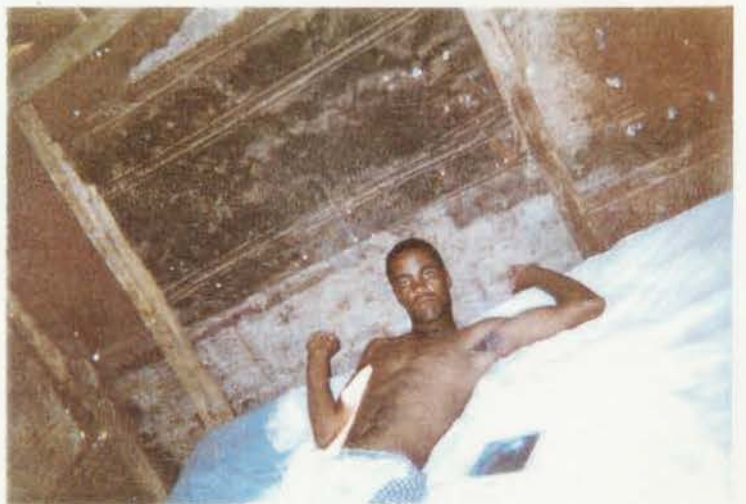


26. Patricia is eating,

27. but I am hungry and angry because I want to eat meat and it will be some time before the christening meal.



28. Finally, Patricia has eaten and bathed and I dressed her in new clothes. She was happy and smiling! It is time for the Christening.





Christian Uiseb

29. My girl-friend and I were flirting with each other in my room and this little girl happened to pass by our open door and see us - she was surprised and shy.





**Linda Axakhoes**

1. My sisters' children: Clarence, Jennifer, Poppy, Feste, Jersey, Guri, and Daedelus (and Queenie who belongs to Willemmina). I will also have children one day.





Linda Axakhoe

2. My mother and step father sitting together in the morning. John was not embarrassed about his socks, he said: "I am an old man, I don't worry - let them see!"

3. My step father John !Naruseb and his dog 'Arib' early in the morning: he was still drunk from the night before.



4. That morning, after my mother (Cisillia Axakhoes) and I went to John's house, we all walked to the river. The water had come down during the night and we all wanted to see it. Here my mother is angry with my step father because he has taken her snuff and she is telling him to give it back: "If you don't return my snuff, you must remember that we will continue to fight!".







5. This is me with Feste, Queenie and Jennifer.

6. This is Wilemina my neighbour, standing outside my bedroom. She is much older than me, she is 45 but looks like a young woman. She is not a big woman, but she is strong: it's maybe her bushman blood.



7. This is my sister's daughter Poppy - I love her too much! She is now at Oshituo in the Herero Reserve and I miss her! Her mother (my sister) is in big trouble because of her husband. They are splitting apart and so she left all her children here with us while she is living in Windhoek. Her husband wanted them back in Oshituo and refused to pay maintenance - he went to the police and made her take the children back to him. I asked her to leave this one, but she told me that her husband is too mad. She has seven children.



8. These are my neighbours going home to Dawetsaub from Okombahe. The man thought that I might send this picture to the police if there was trouble, so he beat the donkey as they went past very quickly.



9. & 10. These pictures were taken near my house. It was so beautiful here at that time, during the rains. I wish that people who have never been here after the rains could see how beautiful it is - it is like paradise, though it passes very quickly.

The Omaruru River in flood.





11. This is my boy-friend Victus sitting beside the fire making coffee. Even on the farm we are also drinking coffee.



12. Victus is relaxing after work.



13. I was not waiting for this! After I took a bath, I was relaxing and drinking a cup of coffee - then Victus called my name and the moment I looked up he took this picture.





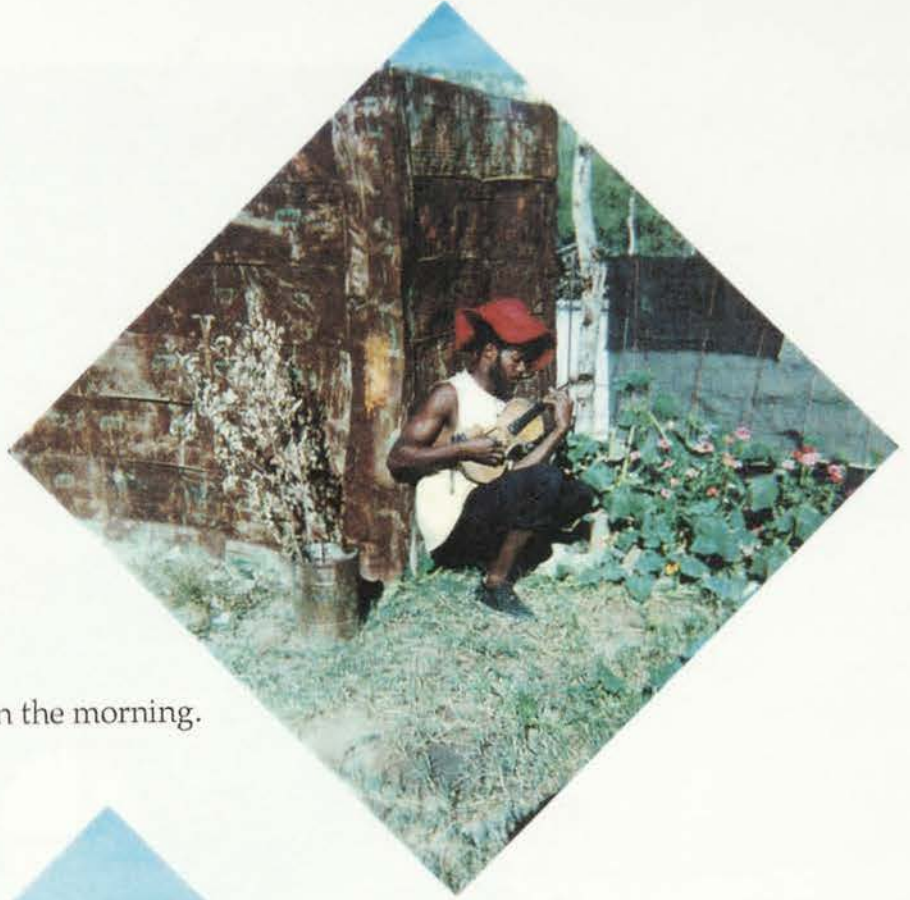
14. My mother and sister are doing something cultural: cleaning tsau soon after the rain. This is called //gara, and the winnowing bowl is called gaub.

15. Victus and I are just going to Okombahe. My hair is looking nice and we are wearing good cloths. I wanted a picture of me looking dressed up!

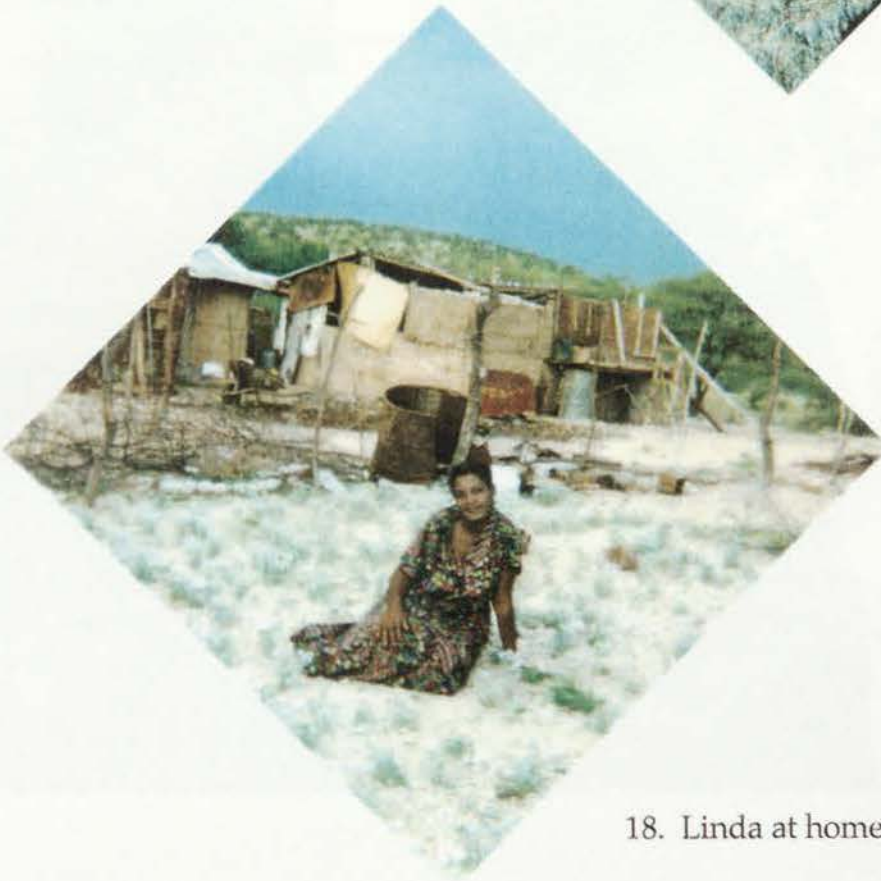


16. I told my brother Usiel to sit down on a chair so that I could make a picture of him: he should have one of himself.





17. Victus playing music in the morning.



18. Linda at home in /Noma.



Ishmael = Kharichab

1. At home in Jansen. My wife (Margaret / Goagoses) is washing clothes while I am in the garden working.



2. Rebecca and Philip are old people from Okombahe. Stones on the ground indicate that there may be tourmaline here so they are removing the bush and starting to dig. They are looking for precious stones in the veld because they are hungry and need some way of making money: their pensions have not come for many months.



3. This is Fistolene /Naris, a pensioner in Okombahe harvesting beans from her garden. She is my brother's woman.



4. Fistolene is preparing beans and porridge for lunch.





5. & 6. At the farm called !Huni-!gaos where family and friends are cooking meat and porridge for an impromptu celebration.



7. Old Johnny is building a new house, since his old one fell apart in the rainy season.



8. It is lunch time and Johnny is hungry - so he is cooking a meal for himself at his old house.



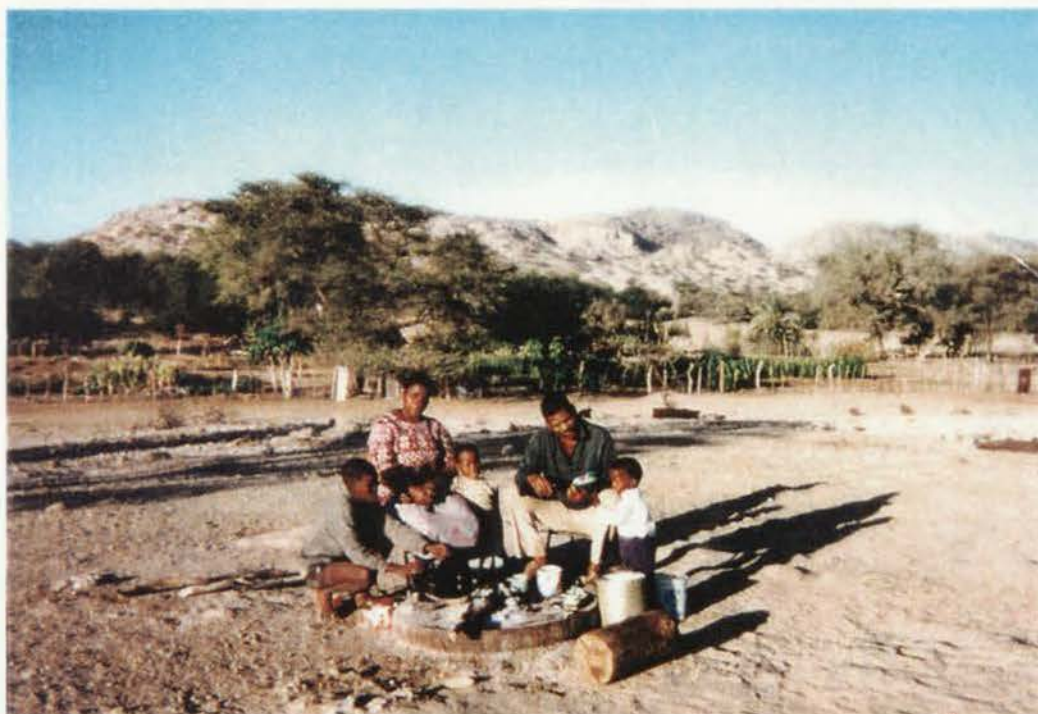
9. I am going home to rest. I have been listening to Nama-Damara radio to hear what has been going on in the world. I am turning the radio off and taking it home with me.



10. My sister, Lena =Kharichas, is helping me to weed and irrigate the garden while I go home to rest. It takes between 1 and 2 hours to water the plants.



11. Margaret and myself, my two sons and step son in the front of our house. It is early in the morning and we are drinking tea before starting work.







Jacky Pietersen

1. Jansen. Ouma Ida washing her grandchildren.



2. Ouma Ida and Ouma Maria.



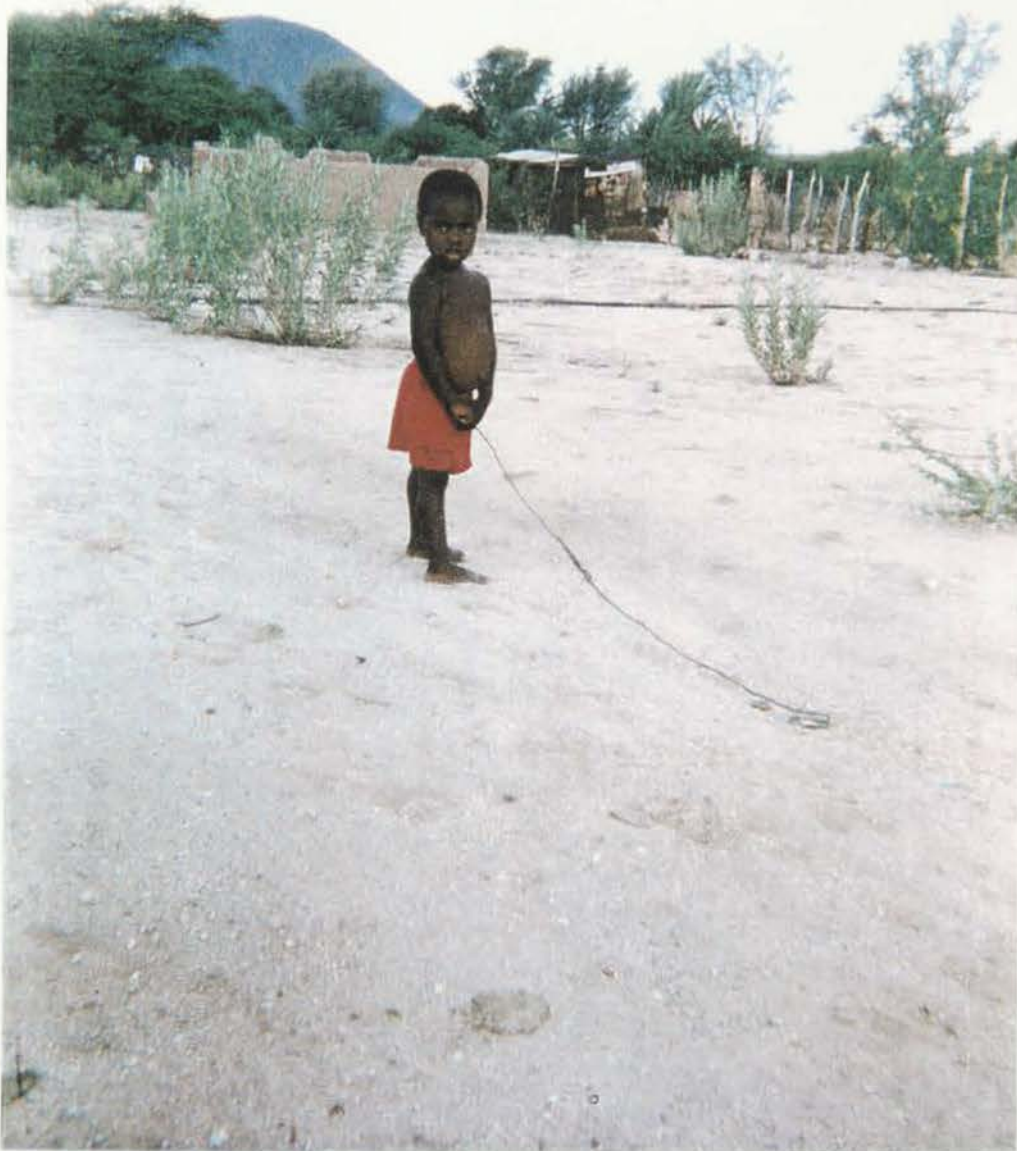
3. Planting seeds in Ida's garden.



4 & 5. Watering the seed beds.







Ricky Locke

1. I don't know this child, but he was playing with his friends on the other side of the river in Okombahe and I just stopped him and took this picture. You can see he his looking a little bit scared.



Ricky Locke

2. This is my great grandmother (my mother's father's mother) cleaning pots and then resting in the shade. Her name is Elsa Noses, but she is just called 'Maeru' (porridge). There are now five generations of us here at our house in Okombahe.



3. This is 'Oan !Gas' (Libertina) pumping petrol at the shop.



4. This is Nobel's daughter Olg and her friend Consetta at home i Blauberg.



5. The ambulance driver in Okombahe. I had just got a puncture on the road and it was impossible to get help from the owner of the vehicle as the phones are very difficult in Okombahe, there is only one line and it is either busy or out of order. So I asked him to try to phone through for me.

6. Mandi, cursing me and telling me not to take her photo.



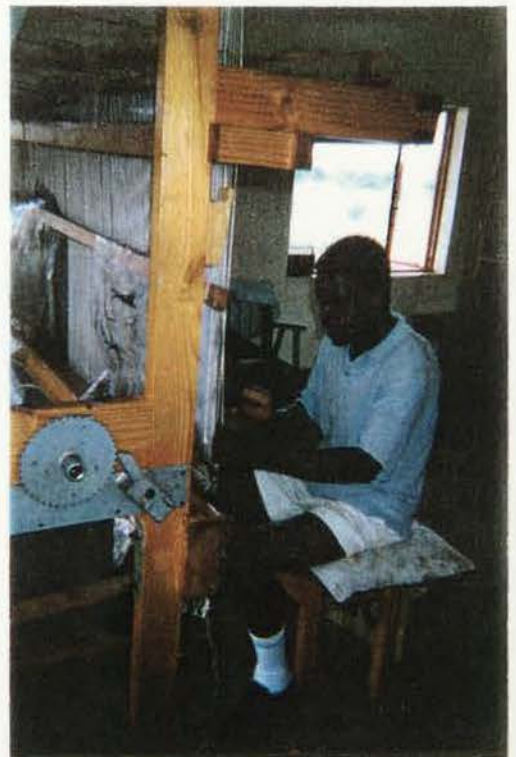




7, 8 & 9. Rebecca runs the weaving workshop with her husband Mateus. This is the whole process of how they are getting the wool ready for weaving. Here she is spinning it, and then cleaning it. After that they are sometimes dyeing it to get other colours like red, blue and green.



10. Mateus can weave about 5 rugs in one week. This was my first visit to their workshop. They are really struggling because of poor market outlets. At the moment, they are sending finished rugs to the church in Windhoek where they are sold to customers, but orders are few and payment often slow.







11, 12 & 13. Workers at the  
Rossing Garden project.

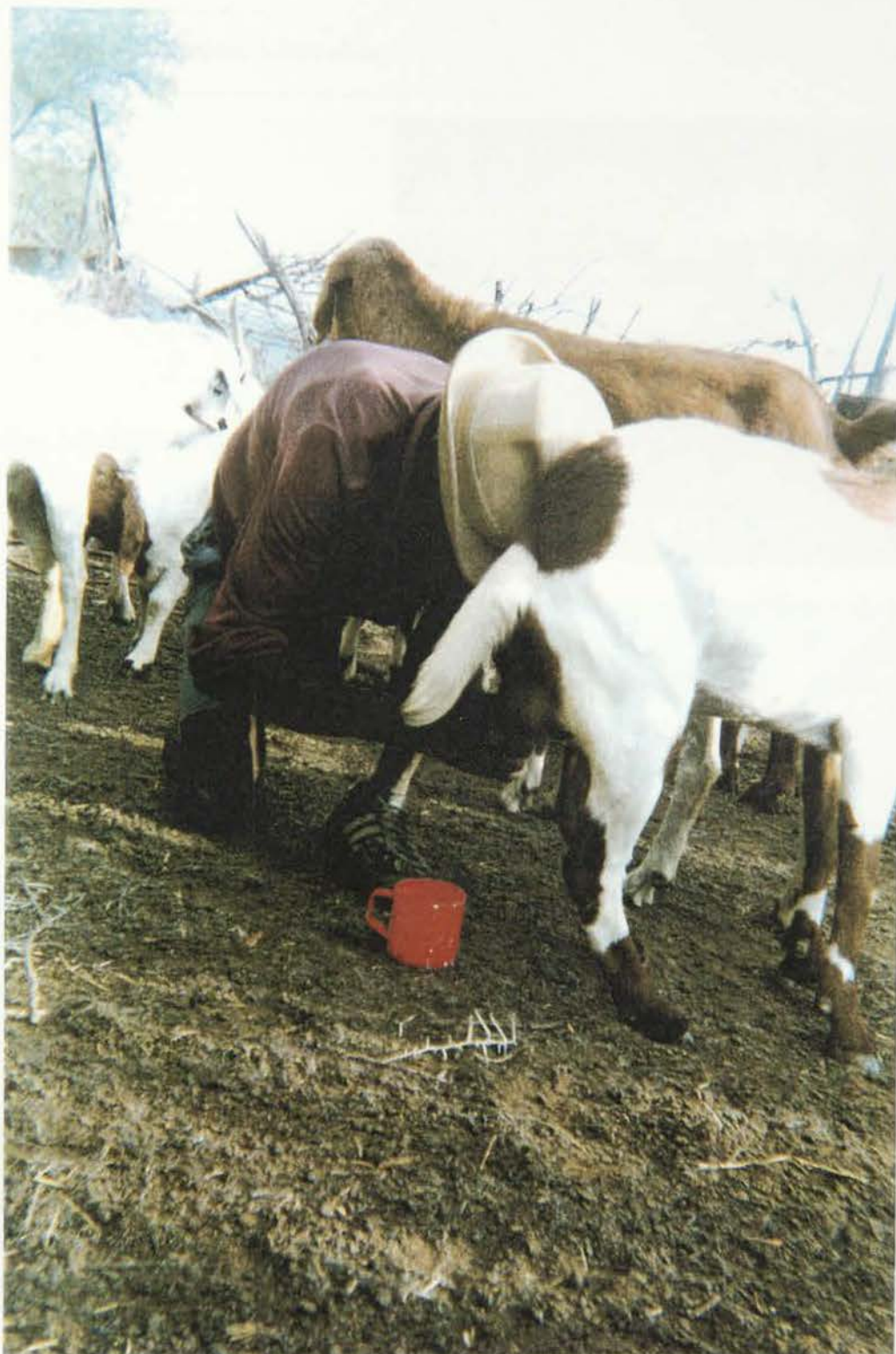






Maria Pietersen Abubakar

1. =Aobhe and Dadu playing =hus



Maria Pietersen Abubakar

2. Augustinus milking his goats.



3. Preparing breakfast at Blaumberg.



4. Baking fat cookies. This woman supplies all the bread for Blaumberg.



5. Early morning at Blaumberg.



6. This man is having trouble starting his fire.

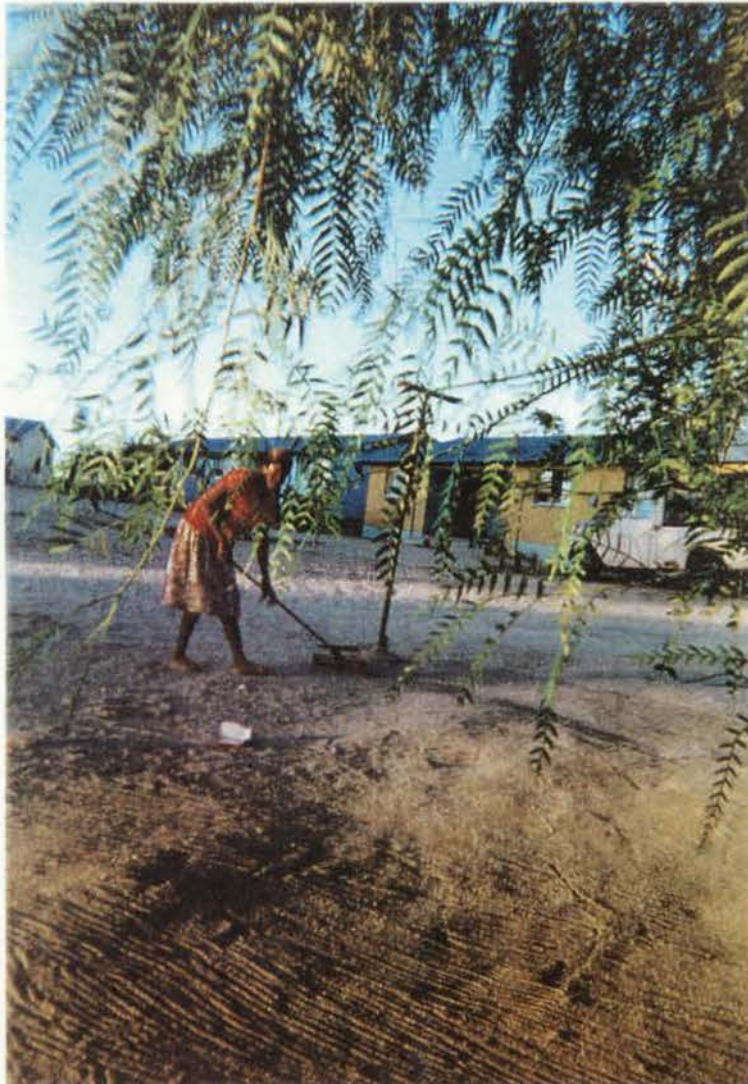






7. My daughter Roxette with a friend.

8. My mother.



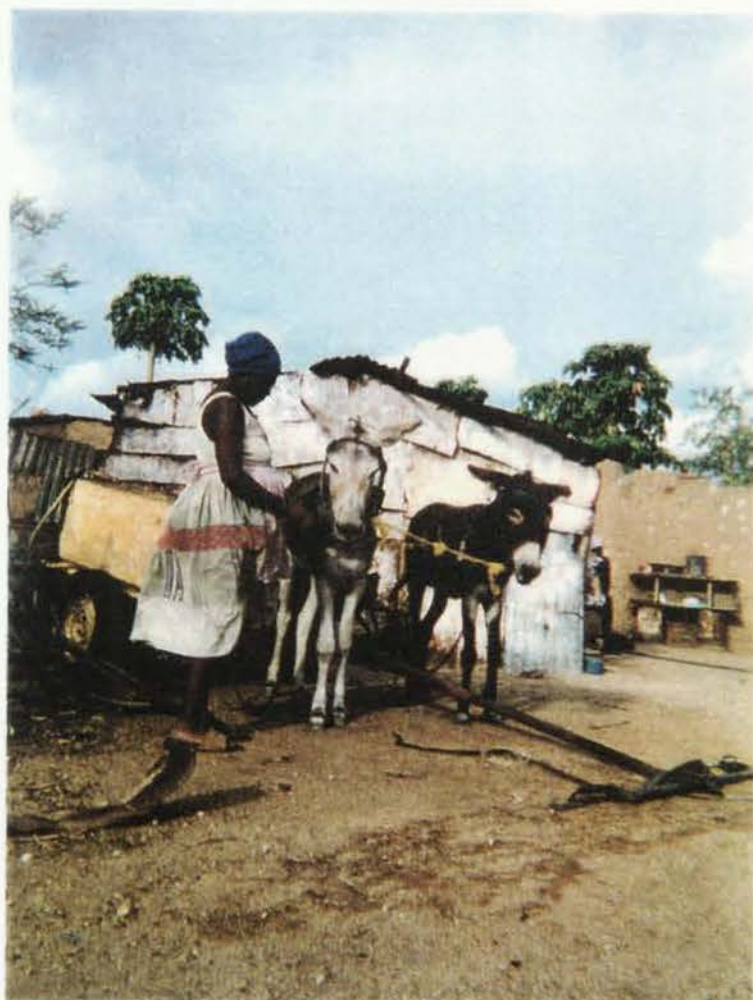
9. My sister Lotte cleaning in front of our house. This is how we spend our mornings at Blaubeerg.





10. Central Hall, Blauberg. A lonely old woman.

11. Harnessing the donkeys.





Maria Pietersen Abubakar

12. Augustinus's cat. If you go there even now, that cat will be lying like this with its leg hanging down.



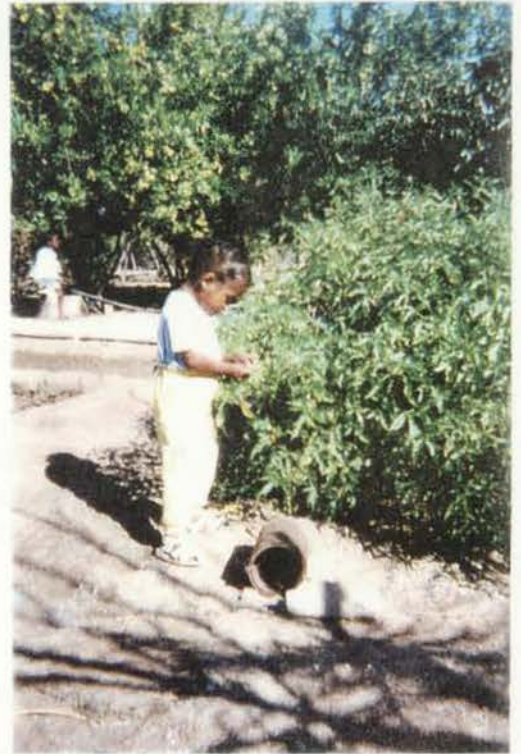


Maria Pietersen Abubakar

13. Making Tambo.



14. Because Roxette doesn't know about plaiting hair she was given the bald doll - Marilyn is saying "look up" but she is too shy to look at the camera.



15. Roxette. Once she came to these pepper plants and bit one and while it was burning her mouth she spoke her first word. "What happened?" we said, and she cried "pepper! pepper". But still she cannot stop going to this pepper tree.

16. This is Marilyn's dolls house.







17. The girls put a trap for birds in the garden. Now, there was no water here so maybe they are collecting water from their urine. First they put water here, under a cage propped up on a stick and when the birds come they pull the stick and catch them. I didn't ask them to do this!

18. I asked the girls to put lemons on their heads.



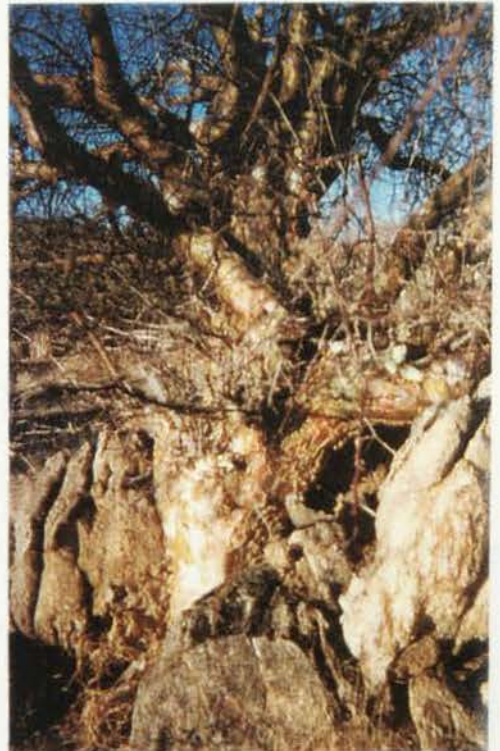


19. Ana trees in the middle of the river. In the summer, this is where we were always having fun, there is a lot of shade and it's where we go to have our picnics and Christmas and things like that.



20. Dendu, Oboti's husband. He is building their new house.

21. A kooper tree. As children we used to collect the leaves from this tree and to use as cups in our dolls houses, they are like copper.



22. Khoris (*Salvadora persica*) in the river. We eat the fruits, some of which are sour and some are sweet: there are two different kinds of berry.





**Maria Pietersen Abubakar**

23. This is the view of Jansen, our house is hidden in the trees. It hasn't really changed at all since I was a little child. But there was one tree around here, we used to call it Nasartjie, it was like a man who was chasing the kids, so every time we came there and were jumping on the tree it made a noise like 'grrrrrrrrr', so we thought 'that man will come out and frighten us'. It has rotted away now.

## Seeing and Perceiving

"It would seem to be the case that Malinowski's stricture that the function of the ethnographer was to see the native's culture from the native's own point of view could at last be achieved - literally and not metaphorically" (Worth 1974:347). These images present us with a multiplicity of view points within an open and dynamic community of photographers, their families, friends and neighbours. The 'ethnographic present' of the photographs speaks of a consciousness which is as much concerned with moving into the future as with its roots in the past. It is hard to see how these photos constitute or objectify something like a Damara culture: we see influences from 19th century German missionaries in easy conjunction with the latest styles of black American youth culture; Rastafarian and Northern European religious symbols given space alongside soft porn pin-ups; a whole constellation of disparate technologies and material artefacts gleaned from a world market and incorporated, naturalised within the specificity of Okombahe's locality.

Far from being primordial, 'ethnicity', 'tribalism', and other forms of identity reside in tangible practices - as, of course, does 'modernity'. They are the social and ideological products of particular processes, of the very conjunctures that set the terms of, and relations between, 'local' and global' worlds (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 44).

A purely visual reading of the images conveys a wealth of detail to the viewer: the physical environment during the rainy season, habitations and associated material artefacts, styles of dress, public gatherings, formal and informal poses, facial expressions, family groups, places of work, play and relaxation. This is the level of engagement at which many ethnographic photographs remain (e.g. Collier & Collier 1986), being for the most part an uncritical variation of the documentary genre (Caldarola 1988: 434). As such they are committed to an ontological level of realism, used as a mirror of life, obscuring discourse and supporting generic referents, "relieving the image of the peculiarities which mark real social events" (ibid.:434) remaining identified with characterisations of the 'typical', 'average', 'types', 'examples' etc.

The Okombahe photographers' comments add a layer of meaning to these visual and ethnographic 'facts': statements conveying humour, irony, affection, frustration, apprehension, hope and desire give depth to stories



about personal relationships and contextualize the photos in terms of social, economic and cultural processes. They also incorporate an awareness of the image making process. My own comments throughout this thesis add a further layer of information which interprets both image and text from my personal point of view, which is further complicated by my personal relationship to the photographers and their subjects. The logical extension of this interpretive approach comes dangerously close to what Sekula refers to as 'literary invention with a trivial relation to the artefacts at hand' (1982:91). The reading of photographs based on historical context, discourse theory, or aesthetic judgement (for example), are reductive in relation to the phenomenological impact of the photos, their 'magic'. And finally, the layering of serial images and extended captions gives a narrative quality to the work of each photographer, which at times seems deliberate and intentional, but for the most part is constructed as a fragmentary and attenuated autobiographical story, specific and personal, which draws the viewer into a multi-faceted web of nuanced meaning.

In short, and to paraphrase Harper (1987:5) the foregoing description of how the Okombahe photos can be 'read' on many levels might be simply divided into four basic typologies:

- 1.) 'Objective' or documentary - as a so-called 'objective' record of artefacts and the relational aspects of the reproduction of social space such as that used by Bateson and Mead (1942) Collier (1967; 1979);

- 2.) 'Reflexive' or photo elicitation - the reflexive use of photos as a tool in interviewing subjects on the meanings implicit in photographic representations of themselves and their society, e.g. Collier & Collier (1986); Sprague (1978);

- 3.) 'Phenomenological' - a medium whereby experience is to some extent reproduced in the viewer's apprehension of the photographic subject through a universal neurobiological foundation that implicates forms of learning and disposition with cultural relevance which operate at an embodied, prelinguistic level, (e.g. Benjamin 1979a; 1979b and Barthes 1989);

- 4.) 'Narrative' - when photos are arranged to tell a story; when the reading of a photo on the three levels described above are combined in the discontinuous temporal dimension where the story teller, the listener and the subjects of the story become mutually dependent, e.g. Berger & Mohr (1989).

A reading of the photo exhibition at the objective, or documentary and the reflexive levels forms the core of the next chapter. It seems to me that the more difficult, theoretical issues surrounding the way we perceive, experience and express ourselves is to be found at the level of the phenomenological and narrative levels of this typology. These pose questions which go to the heart of any understanding of visual apprehension, and also to much wider problems facing anthropological epistemology and theoretical debates within cultural studies generally. The remainder of this chapter will explore some of these debates as to 'how we see each other'.

### **Ambiguity and Analogue**

On the one hand, the reading of a photograph depends on the viewer's ability to place perceived objects within an intelligible system of relationships, within an ideology made up of the "sum of taken-for-granted realities of everyday life; the pre-given determinations of individual consciousness; the common framework of reference for the projection of individual actions" (Burgin 1982: 42). The possibility of meaning which the photograph presents is partially fulfilled insofar as it is embedded in some form of discourse; the problem lies in the fact photographs are as limited as any other medium in exposing some assumed bed-rock of reality - "our preconceptions, our ideology, are primarily determined by widely varying social and historical experience" (1982: 174). On the other hand, this totality of experience, glimpsed in the images made by photographers from Okombahe finally eludes all descriptive, interpretive and critical analysis. "[. . .] I have no other resource than this *irony*: to speak of the 'nothing to say'" (Barthes 1993: 93).

This irony is contingent on the ambiguity of the photographic image, its isolation from the continuity of time and personal history: both time and space are 'framed'. The photograph begs for an interpretation. The photographer's reading of an event or situation, the decision of what to photograph, and what not to photograph can be deliberate and posed, although it is often intuitive and spontaneous: in either case the photographers' choice can be thought of as a cultural construction. At the same time, the relation between the image and the event is immediate and unconstructed: it is like a trace - perfect, analogical. This photographic trace



is produced by reflected light, not consciousness or experience: it is like a message without a code - this is its ambiguity: "photographs do not translate from appearances. They quote from them" (Berger 1989: 96).

The process of reading visual quotes, complex bundles of meaningful information, is not simply a matter of decoding. A family snapshot, for instance is not simply reducible to "the deciphering of meaning which it betrays by being part of the symbolism of an age, class or an artistic group". (Bourdieu 1990: 7). Of course the photographic image is imbued with the viewers ability to translate the quotation of social roles (the husband, grandchild or friend), or social occasions (family occasions, places of work, sites of relaxation) but the understanding of context does not end with our ability to translate quotes into stereotypes or clichés. Critics (such as Bourdieu) who concentrate solely on the photograph's connotative qualities thereby denying the photo's innate ambiguity also tend to deny the social function of subjectivity (Berger 1989:100). Many of the images from Okombahe are both intentional and functional reminders of subjective experience, of emotional bonds and affective experience which defy history; ciphers of memory which encapsulate a subjectivity which is at once contingent on time yet not confined by it.

### **Perception, Memory an Mimesis**

Visual quotations, when positioned within a discourse or contextualised by words, can misinform - the use of photos in the positivist project of early ethnography is a prime example - by reducing photographic information to a conceptual framework in order to verify or answer a specific question. The caption channels our desire for an explanation "whereby photography turns all life's relationships into literature... " (Benjamin 1979b:256). The fact remains that our response to the visual world goes beyond discourse because the act of perception itself arises from a deeply atavistic and instinctual process.

Desire and thought are influenced by discourse and expressed in words. And words figure prominently in the organisation and expression of the self. It is too simplistic, however, to say that the unconscious is structured like a language. Moreover, an emphasis on the linguistic structuring of the mind begs questions about the precultural and prelinguistic foundations of cultural schemas and linguistic structures. (Ingham 1996:7)

In his critique of postmodernism, Ingham argues that by overemphasising the role of the culture as a displaced, unstable locus of meaning (where the play of signifiers reduces the individual to a decentred artefact of a symbolic system), subjective experience, desire and emotion are devalued. The role of the pre-cultural origins of emotion and motivation are subsumed and reified in the notion that social groups and culture overdetermine individual behaviour. However, the 'self' is not simply culturally formed or socially constructed and the images and emotions which arise from pre-cultural, pre-linguistic experience probably play a more important part in unconscious thought than language.

Physical objects are not given to us (seen) as primary data, what is given is only a set of *sensa*. Perception requires the ability to focus and select, and to store accumulated experiences in memory (Huxley 1942:16). In adults, this process of sensing, selecting and perceiving seems to take place simultaneously, but it is built upon an act of recognition through the coherence and correspondences found in memory and imagination. Our perception of any single thing or event depends on our memory of other things and events. The recognition of appearances requires the memory of other appearances. "And these memories, often projected as expectations, continue to qualify the seen long after the stage of primary recognition" (Berger 1989: 113).

This overlap of memory with imagination is a common enough experience. Our imagination gives us the power to recombine memories in novel ways, both consciously and unconsciously affecting how we see the world. The photograph presents us with an exact visual simulation which draws our attention to this anomaly of looking:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject... For it is another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye: other in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. (Benjamin 1979a: 243)

The reality-effect of a photo is accomplished through repeated 'vertical readings' which take place outside of time, (in memory), which implicate not only a narrated world, a world of causes, of 'before and after', of 'if, then',



but also an embodied world, one which is comprehended by what Benjamin refers to as the 'mimetic faculty', "... the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore differences, yield into and become Other." (Taussig 1993: xiii)

### **The 'Physiognomic' and the Neurobiological**

Benjamin refers to this embodied space as the 'physiognomic aspect of visual worlds', where the perceiver is drawn into a complex, subliminal bodily relation to the image: visual perception is learned in relation to tactile experience through a correlation of the senses with one another to create a world of visual objects, concepts and meanings. It is this relationship of the visual to concepts and meanings which is rooted in a bodily knowing made possible by the imaginative, mimetic faculty. Our ability to identify with other bodies, to find correspondences, likeness and difference, concepts and meaning originates in this fundament of perception. Our ability to mime, to copy and represent is fundamental to the complex creation of knowledge. But it is also a complexity "we too easily elide as non-mysterious, with our facile use of terms such as identification, representation, expression and so forth - terms which simultaneously depend upon and erase all that is powerful and obscure in the network of associations conjured by the notion of the mimetic." (Taussig 1993:21)

Physiognomic aspects of the visual are exhibited in the habits of everyday life where social routines implicate the unconscious strata of culture to bodily disposition; in architecture and the physical environment where space is not simply conceived as a blue-print, but is "more like a mobile Cubist constellation of angles and planes running together in time, where touch and three-dimensional space make the eyeball an extension of the moving, sensate body" (Taussig 1993:26). Even the language which we employ in constructing abstract concepts, *to substantiate, illustrate, to give an example* are forms of a sympathetic magic where likenesses, copies, assume the power of the original. Lakoff (1987) and Johnson (1987) suggest that preverbal processes of conceptualisation precede and underlie both language and thought. Such cognitive approaches "imply that language is grounded in and surrounded by nonlinguistic mental processes" (Ingham 1996:36). Serial-symbolic processing (such as language) is only a part of what takes place in the cognitive process.

The distinction between verbal and non-verbal cognition are well established in the field of neuroscience and the study of the functional differences between the two hemispheres of the brain where "both hemispheres are involved in higher cognitive functioning, with each half of the brain specialised in complementary fashion for different *modes* of thinking, both highly complex" (Edwards 1979:29). Each hemisphere perceives 'reality' in its own way while a sense of individual unity is maintained through the thick bundle of nerves (*corpus callosum*) which connect the left and right hemispheres. These different modes of thinking, or consciousness are in effect different ways of knowing. The left hemisphere is verbal and analytic, it uses symbols and makes abstractions, it is sequential, lineal and logical. The right hemisphere processes the same sensory information nonverbally and synthetically, its cognitive mode is analogic, seeing likenesses and metaphoric relationships, it is non-temporal and spatial, seeing things in a relational sense, outside of time, and it is intuitional, able to make sense of complexity through emotion, 'hunches' and visual images.

Neuroanatomy demonstrates the function of the right hemisphere of the brain as the dominant site of pattern recognition, motor manipulation and emotionality - "it mediates recognition of emotional expression in the self and others" (Ingham 1996:37). Various neural systems in both hemispheres mediate nonlinguistic understandings of the body-self and the external world. A second system, located primarily in the left hemisphere, "mediates the representation of phonemes and syntax. And a third system mediates the two-way relations between these first two systems" (ibid.). Such a theory of neurobiological process is in keeping with anthropological theories of cultural transmission such as those espoused Maurice Bloch (1990), that 'chunky knowledge' is the processual locus of many forms of learning, 'dispositions' and common practice which operate at an embodied, prelinguistic level. "They involve habits, bodily skills and routines, and ways of thinking and feeling that are hard if not impossible to put into words" (Ingham 1996:37).



## Connectionism and Cognitive Anthropology

What Bourdieu defines as habitus, and Benjamin refers to as second nature, merges with what Bloch and Ingham describe as 'connectionism':

[. . .] the idea that most knowledge, especially the knowledge involved in everyday practice, does not take a linear, logic-sentential form but rather is organised into highly complex and integrated networks or mental models most elements of which are connected to each other in a great variety of ways (Bloch 1989:130).

Anthropological theories tend to treat cognitive systems as either an unexplained postulate or as a product of collective historical process: the cognitive system is received ready-made from previous generations through the re-creation of 'culture', 'collective representation' and 'ideology'. Furthermore, anthropologists often assume that culture is transmitted through and constructed by language; that it is ultimately language-like in that it consists of linked linear propositions (Bloch 1990:184). Moreover, cultural knowledge is conceived of as arising through one single unified process which embraces culture, ideology and cognition. Bloch challenges all three of these notions by suggesting that cognition is built up through interaction with the environment; that concept formation precedes language. That classificatory concepts are based on an appraisal of their referents in the world implies that the mental form of these concepts "involve loose and implicit practical-cum-theoretical pattern networks of knowledge" which become in effect "chunked networks of loose procedures and understandings which enable us to deal with standard and recurring situations" (1990:185)

These mental models are, what is more, only partly linguistic; they also integrate a visual imagery, other sensory cognition, the cognitive aspects of learned practices, evaluations, memories of sensations, and memories of typical examples. Not only are these mental models not lineal in their internal organisation but information from them can be accessed simultaneously from many different parts of the model through 'multiple parallel processing' (1989: 130).

We are continually 'reading' our visual surroundings in a variety of ways, through a complex interaction of the brain's two 'ways of knowing'. Activity, emotion and contextual familiarity or surprise combine in both

focused and expressive readings. "In every act of looking there is an expectation of meaning. This expectation should be distinguished from a desire for an explanation" (Berger 1989:117). Explanations arise after the act of looking, the left hemisphere's analytical response to the syncretic act of perceiving the bundled information of visual quotes. We find meaning in them through the correspondence of the perceptual process with the coherence of appearances. Appearances implicate a 'frame of mind' which goes beyond the discrete physical phenomena they represent - this tension between appearances and their implications give rise to the ambiguity inherent in the photograph's uncoded quotation. It is precisely this ambiguity which stimulates how we think, feel or remember when confronted by an image. "Appearances are so complex, that only the search which is inherent in the act of looking can drag a reading out of their underlying coherence" (ibid.:118).

If visual perception is itself derived from a process of quotation, it is not surprising that the reading of a still image functions in a similar way. How do we overcome this ambiguity inherent in defining visual meaning? The dualism implied in our use of language to describe the world is indicative of two functionally separate modes consciousness as metaphorically defined in the neuroscience of the brain. Barthes defines this ambiguity, or 'madness' of the photograph as a combination of its phenomenological emptiness and at the same time its temporal certainty: "The Photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: a mad image chafed by reality" (1993:115). One means with which society tames this madness consists in making photography into art: "when there is no longer any madness in it; when its *noeme* is forgotten and when consequently its essence no longer acts on me. . ." (ibid.:117). The other is to generalise the photograph within a master narrative or to subject it to critical judgement thereby disarming it of its specificity, 'its scandal'.

Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits; mad if this realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: a strictly revulsive moment which reverses the course of the thing, and which I shall call, in conclusion, the photographic *ecstasy*. [ . . . ] The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilizing code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality. (ibid.: 119)



## Towards a Visual Ethnography

The difficulty of writing ethnography is comparable to Barthes' discussion of reading a photograph. In ethnography, as a post-modern discourse, it is no longer acceptable to posit a direct subject/ object relationship. Critical theory is the vehicle whereby we open ethnography to a world of "reading, imbricating, implicating a divided and unstable subject in the multiple instabilities of a text which continually opens on to other texts" (Burgin 1986: 199). My appeal for a legitimacy of the visual as ethnography is not based on some Romantic notion of 'art' as a place of transcendence or of the 'artist' as spiritual or intuitional supplicant. It is rather an appeal to 'another way of telling' as Berger and Mohr (1989) suggest, insofar as the critical forms of articulating sociality and subjectivity are as deeply embedded in the visual as they are in language. My objective in groping for a theory of representation based on photographs from Okombahe is to open a space within the critical discourse of anthropology making the photographs themselves a counterbalance to the overwhelming influence which language and writing have exerted in the development of theories of representation. Again, I am not arguing that visual representations are independent of other symbolic systems such as language, but that they take their place in the world through a distinct form of apprehension which I have tried briefly to elucidate. I seek to emphasise the dual nature of interpreting culture's Janus face of expression and the discursive power which surrounds and informs it.

It is not my intention to delineate a 'Damara culture' or even a 'culture of Okombahe' in a carefully laid out exposure of the optical unconscious. While I hope to achieve this to a very limited degree, my main objective is a plea to the viewer, echoed in the sentiment expressed by Roland Barthes: "Depth is born only at the moment the spectacle itself slowly turns its shadow toward man and begins to look at him." (1989:73) It is also a claim for the legitimacy of visual representation in ethnographic discourse, as a distinct medium both independent of and complimentary to that of speaking and writing. These photos are a site of work both for the photographers, their subjects and you, the viewer, where they both structure and are structured by familiar perceptual codes, and (occasionally) an incommensurable (existential) insight.

Apart from the event photographed, apart from the lucidity of the idea, we are moved by the photograph's fulfilment of an expectation which is intrinsic to the will to look. The camera completes the half-language of appearances and articulates an unmistakable meaning. When this happens we suddenly find ourselves at home amongst appearances, as we are home in our mother tongue. (Berger 1989:129)

## **Conclusion: Photo Narratives**

In the next chapter I will isolate some of the visual and narrative themes which run throughout the exhibition. This requires several distinct ways of seeing and reading: the exhibition as text, a medium to be interpreted in relation to cultural codes; as visual and narrated data, as language structured by codes of 'grammar', and as stories, as an affective form, interpreted through expressions of emotion, memory and fantasy.

The exhibition photographs rely to a large extent on how they hang together as a whole, and on ethnographic comparisons in terms of age, family background, and the personal histories of the photographers. As such, I have abstracted the meanings and motivations of the photographers from knowledge derived from my fieldwork and interpreted this knowledge after the fact of the visual and textual evidence. The inherent lexical openness of the still photograph provokes this prior naming and characterisation. The same holds true for de-coding visual data. The positivist, 'objective' approach of researchers into visual communication such as Collier (1967), ultimately conflates the computing and interpreting of spatial arrangements and material artefacts in terms of the aesthetics and psychology of a "cultural inventory", with a functionalist project of uncovering the 'natives point-of-view'. Similarly, Worth and Adair's (1975) analysis of the narrative and stylistic devices utilized by Navajo film makers falls short of this aim. Their discussion of the structural and processual aspects of film production and self-representation relies on a textual reading of visual imagery, in order to reveal not only the natives point of view, but also "to see just how we pattern our own world through our own culture" (1975:253). Their concluding remarks acknowledge the limitations of interpreting the visual through words and stresses the value of studying "personal expression as a "store of knowledge about man which our culture traditionally calls art" (1975: 262). Ethnographic self-representations using



still images present an opportunity to proceed beyond this impasse by examining both the discursive and expressive elements of 'culture'.

For the photographers of Okombahe, the process of making pictures and the pictures themselves were meaningful, and to a large extent as uncomplicated as Burgin suggests when he says "that it is extensively believed by photographers that meanings are to be found in the world much in the same way that rabbits are found on downs [... ] all that is required is the talent to spot them and the skill to shoot them" (1982:40). The images and the photographers' commentary imply a variety of intentions, interests and emotions which bear directly on their perception of self-hood, social relationships and place. My own commentary on the photographs (Chapter 2) positions each individual photographer in the context of his or her life as revealed by a combination of their creativity and my knowledge of them as individuals within broader social and historical frameworks which define Okombahe.

Since the project was deliberately open-ended in terms of subject matter, many narrative themes emerge. It is difficult to do justice to the variety and complexity of issues which the photos raise, however this in itself illustrates the poly-valency of meaning arising within broad narrative structures. By viewing the photographs as the work of individual photographers and as a whole in the form of the exhibition, numerous visual quotations residing in each image can be seen to take a narrative form. Like memories, the stories that the photographs convey are placed within a discontinuous field of time and space - they both depend on and oppose the passage of time (Berger 1989: 280). When placed in a sequence these take on the ambiguous form of a story, which unlike photo reports, are invested with the authority of their subjects.

Stories are based on a tacit agreement between teller and listener where discontinuities arise in what is explicitly described, and a host of details and actions which are absent become implicit.

The discontinuities of the story and the tacit agreement underlying them fuse teller, listener and protagonists into an amalgam. An amalgam which I would call the story's *reflecting subject*. The story narrates on behalf of this subject, appeals to it and speaks in its voice. (Berger 1989: 285)

Similarly, the discontinuities inherent in the technique of montage, used in writing, film-making and photography create a reflexive space, overcoming the realist monologic narratives of past ethnographic practice (Marcus 1994:43). The notion of sequence is relinquished in the narrative form of montage, which like memory, evokes the multi-faceted aspect of people's lives who coexist in time and conjoin diverse localities. In the same way, the photographers from Okombahe represent themselves in a montage of coexisting stories: multi-local, simultaneous, living, and experiential. And the ambiguity of the photos, their numerous quotations and uncoded messages, the frozen traces of instances quickly swallowed in memory, reflect a truth central to their shared reality. Far from being a hindrance to comprehending something about the intractable reality of Damara lives, the dialectic of the still image in the realm of memory and imagination are expressions of it.



## CHAPTER 2

### PHOTO NARRATIVES: IMAGINATION AND DESIRE

[. . .] the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination.  
Roland Barthes in *The photographic message* (1989: 205)

What matters is not who is holding the camera but who is doing the viewing:  
whose 'desire' is being satisfied.  
Crawford & Turton in *Film as ethnography* (1992: 165)

In the previous chapter, I argued for the legitimacy of photographic imagery as an ethnographic form, as a distinct medium, rich in possibilities for grasping the view point of 'others'. In this chapter I will write about these same images as the site of my work, as a locus of my memory, as a text coded by the connotations inherent in my experience and personal history. By turning the uncoded messages of still photographs into text, I want to explore the connotations implicit in the act of reading appearances as intelligible signs, without losing sight of the denoted phenomenological experience lurking in the photographic trace. The process of constructing stories around the visual is dependent on a temporal structuring which is discontinuous with the still image: it involves isolating details, finding correspondences and patterns which depend on my reading of the images in relationship to my memory. The dangers of pacifying the 'intractable reality' of Okombahe through the connotative dimension of language must be weighed against the possibility of arriving at a more accurate understanding of the pictorial and narrative elements which contextualize social life through a reading of photographs which "depends on the readers 'knowledge' just as though it were a matter of a real language (*langue*), intelligible only if one has learned all the signs" (Barthes 1989: 207).

We already know so many of the signs - so many of the photographers' concerns are our concerns: appearances play around issues of sex, fighting, food, reputations and status; affection for children, spouses and ageing relatives; the sense of beauty, transience or insecurity associated with the landscape; the acknowledgement of mortality inherent in family portraits: the amplitude of the photographic present can be picked through for any number of details which betray universal human emotions. An almost

indecent joy in the images, promised from a 'toy' camera, is counter-weighted by a serious intent to record and communicate.

The photographs often seem to make sense to us, even before the text picks out the image's arbitrary detail. Tekla's affection for her child, Christolene's pride in her man, Maria's portrait of a sleeping cat, or Christine's study of two girls sitting on adjacent toilets: each conveys a poignancy which is immediate and recognisable. The subjects often gaze back at us with an engaged intent: Angelika posed as an angel by the halo of a papaya tree; the curious and shy girl framed in the doorway of Christian's room, polka-dotted, hesitating on a symbolic threshold separating a child from womanhood; the serious scrutiny of Christolene's in-laws whose expressions convey hardship, sorrow and determination (are their almost hostile looks directed at Christolene or at us?); the dignity and humour expressed by Albert's elderly neighbours who, while posing, are at the same time self-aware and unpretentious. We see individuals whose realities are in the final analysis as incommensurable as those of our own family, friends and neighbours. There are self-portraits, often so consciously constructed to glamorise what we would normally only see as shabby or barren but which instead, force us to reflect on the vapidness of our own self-images which tend to be submerged in a culture of commodity images and images as commodities (Hartford 1997).

And then there are the stories. Sequences of images convey narratives as a day-in-the-life of a rural farming family or the drama of theft, drunkenness and sexual liaisons surrounding the christening of Christian's three year old niece. Just as a photographic reading based solely on visual information is discontinuous with the denoted photographic image, narrative form is based on a tacit understanding that stories themselves are constructed with interruptions: the authority of a story is achieved when it makes sense of these, when the connections between what is said and what is not said becomes whole, absorbed in a form of institutional activity invested with the "authority of its characters, its listener's past experience and its teller's words" (Berger 1989:285). Added to image is text, and the story becomes sight, insight and all the space between the lines.

The uncritical quality of the combined visual and textual story is deceptive: the words present a pared down description which conveys everything you need to know in order to find your own critical insight. Take Linda's portraits of her parents for example:

[This is] my step-father and his dog early in the morning: he was still drunk from the night before." "That morning. . . my mother is angry with my step-father because he has taken her snuff and she is telling him to give it back: 'If you don't return my snuff, you must remember that we will continue to fight!'" [At the same time] "the water had come down during the night and we all wanted to see it". [Then she catalogues the names accompanying a portrait of her nieces and nephews]: "My sister's children - Clarence, Jennifer, Poppy, Feste, Guri, and Daedelus. I will also have children one day.

The accumulation of disconnected comments and informal asides quickly serves to construct a multi-faceted story around Linda's life, a mini autobiography of the image's present tense.

In this chapter I will add a further layer of narrative complexity to the stories told by the photographers of Okombahe - my own story of being an observer, a listener and a reteller of these photo tales. The desire which brings this story of Okombahe 'to life', resides in the focused convergence of all of these narrative elements, but it is the photographer's original desire to look, record and to comment which resonates authority at each narrative level, progressively distanced and subject to the corruption of other's desires (mine and yours) as the story is retold in a chimera of words around fixed and open images.



*Greetings, Gossip and Rasta Reciprocity*

The photo<sup>1</sup> of 'the wedding party' (1) was one of only ten facial close-ups produced in the photo project. It was enlarged as a poster advertising the exhibition in Windhoek and it illustrates an appealing aspect of the

<sup>1</sup> Numbers in brackets refer to the exhibition photos as illustrated in Chapter 1.



intersection of gazes to which the title refers: how we see each other. The boy in the foreground of this image was nicknamed /Gokhoeb (show-off man). The day I met /Gokhoeb, he had come to see the poster which Albert had stuck to the door of his house. /Gokhoeb approached the poster with a swagger, kissed his image, and then posed in front of it, vainly mimicking a style of pop imagery prevalent in teen-idol magazines. This convergence of name and behaviour in the double-take of pose and image confirmed the aptness of the poster image for me! There seemed to be a perfect example of mimesis - the spontaneous appropriation of the visual quote from both poster image and media stereotypes, the sympathetic magic of the image and its power to influence what it is a copy of (Benjamin 1979b:162; Taussig 1994:206).

As they waited for a 'hike', packed like sardines into the back of a small pick-up truck along with their bedding and bundles of clothes, the young men in the wedding party at first expressed scepticism about **Albert /Haseb's** 'toy' camera (2) . Both photos were taken in the dusty, open village square of Okombahe where donkey carts, cars and pick-up trucks (bakkies) arrive and depart brimming with travellers who have no other means of travelling the long distances between the dispersed settlements and towns of rural Damaraland: 'getting hike' is the only form of public transport. Albert had approached the bakkie like a photo journalist and 'snapped' without greeting anyone: the two contrasting reactions to his unannounced appearance - a distanced cool appraisal and an open responsiveness - are indicative of a more general ritual function inherent in casual public greetings. Social relationships in terms of status, role and personal affiliation are expressed through the manner and form in which greetings are exchanged - between young men these attributes are pointedly contested through the use of kinship terms, respect words and bantering around the subject of reciprocity. Many of Albert's photos can be read as a form of casual, on-going dialogue used in the daily, public interaction of the people of Okombahe to test social identity and personal relationships. The 'how we see each other' of the visual image might be more accurately expressed as 'how we greet each other' in Albert's photo stories.

During the first few months of my stay in Okombahe, the business of getting my greetings right was a continual source of surprise and confusion to me. I knew the various standard forms of address and response:

*Mire* (Say it!)

*!Gai a* (It's good)

*Aitsama mire!* (Say it yourself!)

*!Gai da go* (We are fine)

as well as several variations asking such rhetorical questions as "Did you get up?" or "Did you sleep well?" and of course knowing at what time of day each was appropriate. Older people, and people in respected positions such as the head teacher and councillor seemed to appreciate my deference when I added the respect form of the pronoun in my greeting: "*Mi du re!*". Initially, because I was a stranger, an outsider, I was always the first one to speak, unless I was being accosted by someone for money, cigarettes, food or some other 'favour'. Gradually I came to see that the order in which people address each other has symbolic significance. The general 'rule' is that as a self-respecting person you are not the first to speak when someone else approaches you, especially if you are 'at rest' or 'in your own space'.

One of my best teachers in the nuances of Damara greeting etiquette was Maria Pietersen's mother, Ouma Ida. We were on friendly terms, since I lived within 50 metres of the Pietersen homestead and we greeted each other several times a day. We often ate together and we helped each other in small ways - I often worked in Ida's garden for an hour or two and she or her widowed sister (Ouma Maria) usually washed my clothes; I was allowed free use of water from the well in the river and gave the Pietersens lifts to Okombahe in my bakkie. As time went on I began to see that the manner in which we greeted each other betrayed a whole domain of subtleties around status, position, relatedness and reciprocity. Of course I could choose to ignore what seemed to me a perverse stubbornness on Ida's part: she would often walk into my camp and pretend as if she were about to sit down before greeting me, waiting for the last possible instant to do so, before it became an explicit issue, although usually I was just glad to see her anyway. I sometimes tried this out on her in reverse, just to see how finely I could judge my timing, and sometimes I was greeted first when I went to visit her and this was either a sign of affection or a dismissal of the greetings game, a change in 'tactics', a temporary lapse in the rules. My interpretation of greeting etiquette might sound petty, but it is an effective means of communicating relatedness, respect or disrespect, very quickly, and is actively used as such, rather than as a veneer of polite equality, so common in European casual greetings. On occasion it was important that I express my own self-respect by remaining silent or engaging in only the briefest of

greetings when I passed other neighbouring homesteads: this aspect of Damara social behaviour intrigued me because it seemed to express a more general and innate irony about social conventions generally.

Albert recounts his own tactics for testing and defining relationships: he confronts people publicly by asking to 'borrow' cigarettes, alcohol or food (8,13,22,25), or he photographs other people doing the same thing - the woman /*Obes* (beggar) is 'drinking the pocket' of a man in exchange for the unlikely prospect of later 'sharing love' (20); two old women in the bottle store argue about their credit in terms of their status as old aged pensioners (25). Social relationships are expressively defined by this verbal discussion around reciprocity or the lack of it. A tension permeates this constant negotiation around giving and sharing which is fundamental to the manner in which people define themselves and each other. It is made explicit in personal names: the root 'to give' (*au*) is incorporated into generic kinship titles as well as nick-names of friends such as *Aubeb* - a person who gives (6). Home-names such as /*Khom-i-toma* (no sympathy from anyone), *Surigu* (jealous of each other), *Hui-khoeob* (no one to help me), *Mibagu* (speak to each other) and *Khom-tatide* (I won't say anything) reiterate a variety of stereotypes related to social identity within this small rural community.

The contests surrounding identity and status sometimes found violent expression, especially among inebriated men, in disputes over kinship and respect titles, almost as if the generalised negativity accruing from the culture of apartheid had been internalised. Such violent incidents were not confined to drunken males either. Albert's girl-friend, Sylvia was attacked one afternoon in the open village square by one of Albert's distant relatives, a young woman who had loaned Albert \$3 (£0.50). Sylvia had spent the afternoon with this woman who was a casual friend, but had left abruptly when their conversation had become heated over the repayment of Albert's petty loan. Sylvia had walked away amidst the acrimony of name calling and insults. However, the pent-up violence which this released found an unexpected outlet when this young woman attacked Sylvia with a piece of broken glass, cutting and permanently scarring her face from her temple to her jaw bone. This anarchistic disregard for rigid social conventions was part of a dialectic, the other side of which found expression in formalised naming and reciprocity practices which tacitly acknowledged the ever present threat of violence underscoring many aspects of social relations in Okombahe.



Albert portrays the sociality of exchange as encoded and practised in public activities: verbal interchange, the baking and selling of food, repairing tape machines, trading stories, fighting about girl friends, girls grooming each other. The practice of reciprocity and its bearing on status constitutes a (verbal, spatial, embodied) discourse in Damara social relations having direct relevance to concepts of kinship, hierarchy, and property; this constitutes a central theme to Albert's images of daily life in Okombahe.

Some intimations of concepts of social space are also evident in Albert's photographs. The distance occasioned by the institutionalised and gendered space of the girl's hostel (3) becomes more personal and overtly political in the boy's shower: "the guys are complaining about paying high hostel fees and having to bath in wash-hand basins" (4); old people are often viewed from further away than contemporaries and friends, indicating respect through physical distance. The division between inside and outside is explicit to several images of cars, houses or shops when looking through a door or window, allowing the photographer to come closer to his subjects through this conceptual division of space. The children playing house (14) mimic this ephemeral architectural boundary in an abstract simulation of inside/outside, using a single piece of string pegged to the ground.

When I first met Albert (also known as /Eteb or 'little fish') in 1995, he had been living in Okombahe for just over a year, having moved here to 'look after' his older brother's and grandmother's house in the government's so-called 'old aged home' known as Blau Berg. He was also known to many of his peers as 'Rasta Man' because of his short neat 'dreads', a 'religious' attitude towards dagga<sup>2</sup> smoking, and a lively political interest dating back to his involvement in student protests before independence. A prominent scar on his left shoulder, put there by a drunken boy wielding a knife was a reminder of a more reckless period of youth and township violence. /Eteb was 25 years old and unemployed. His teenage girl-friend Sylvia lived with him at the time, but as her pregnancy advanced she returned to her mother's house in Otjiwarongo where she delivered a son towards the end of the year.

His mother, a widow for the last 15 years, was living in a squatter camp adjacent to the township in Omaruru. She continued to support an array of 'grandchildren' with occasional help from their parents, and had only recently become eligible for the state pension of N\$135 (£20) a month.

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<sup>2</sup> Marijuana.

/Eteb also helped her with occasional gifts of cash or food from his meagre resources.

/Eteb's father had been born in southern Angola, the issue of a brief liaison between an Angolan girl and a Welsh development worker. During the 1960's he had walked south into Namibia and obtained work as a miner at Tsumeb where he learned to speak Herero and Afrikaans. He later married /Eteb's mother and settled in Omaruru: /Eteb grew up speaking fluent Damara, Oshihherero, Oshivambo and Afrikaans. In recalling his father to me, /Eteb spoke with fondness about the discipline he received, the distinction which was implicit to being his father's only boy and the excitement associated with secretly leaving the township late at night with his father to poach kudu or buck in the surrounding white commercial farms.

He used several family surnames depending on circumstances: Jones (his paternal grandfather) conferred tentative symbolic status in official circles while Gawaseb, (his mother's maiden name) and /Haseb (his maternal aunt's married name) connected him into a wide network of several hundred people through kinship. Like many Damara children, he was brought up in the family of his mother's relatives. At the age of five, he was 'given' to an older brother (actually his maternal cousin) shortly after he married and established a new household in Walvis Bay. This 'brother' was in effect repaying a debt to /Eteb's mother who had previously raised him as a child. /Eteb carried another less noticeable scar from this period - he had been blinded in one eye after his 'step-mother' struck him with the buckle end of a belt for a petty misdemeanour. In Walvis Bay, he quickly learned to fend for himself with part-time jobs such as selling newspapers. At the age of 12, he chose to board at a rural primary school outside of Walvis Bay and three years later went to the secondary school in Otjiwarongo where he passed his Standard 10 and met Sylvia. He worked in a local butchers shop for a year or so and then at the behest of another older 'brother' (*aubutib* designates both older brother and cousin) went to manage a rural shop in the communal area of Otjimbingwe.<sup>3</sup> This was the same cousin who 'owned' the residence in Blau Berg which /Eteb was looking after when I met him.

Several key factors in /Eteb's decision to remain in Okombahe were explained to me in the following way. In the first place, the opportunity to

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<sup>3</sup> Previously designated a 'Native Reserve' for Oshihherero and Damara speaking people.

'look after' his family's tenancy of two houses in Blau Berg (one of which was full of building materials that his cousin planned to make a restaurant in Okombahe) afforded him some status as an independent man and meant that he would have the opportunity of a job when his cousin's restaurant went ahead. It was also a chance to prove his trustworthiness, and at the same time a rare opportunity to 'own' a proper rent-free house with running water, electricity and secure locks. Secondly, living in Okombahe meant that he was distant from his family and therefore could live away from the unavoidable daily responsibilities and demands of his relatives, whether these be moral demands that he give up his 'Rasta' attitudes, or material demands for money and food. /Eteb often spoke to me about the lack of trust within his extended family, especially between himself and his older cousins and their wives. Finally, Okombahe offered him a few opportunities for 'making business' through petty trading in alcohol, cigarettes or ice lollies (which could be made in the freezer his cousin had left in the house.)<sup>4</sup> /Eteb worked as my translator sporadically during the year I lived around Okombahe. Towards the end of that time he had begun to establish a small informal photography business, taking portraits of neighbours and friends.

Albert's social life seemed to centre around Okombahe's junior secondary school; his friends were younger students who used his house as an escape from the school hostel or their parents' home. His relationship with Michael (9, 10, 16) was one of the few he maintained with a local family although by the time I left Okombahe, they had fallen out with each other over the 'borrowing' of tape cassettes. The interior decoration of juxtaposed biblical scripture and pornography (9, 10) in Michael's house is indicative of divergent values underlying a more general discourse involving sexuality, morality and gender associated with the instability inherent in many male/female relationships in Okombahe and Damaraland generally. Albert's own bedroom was plastered with images of naked white women, a poster of Jean Claude van Damme and the text of an ad for 'Wonderbra' which read: "look me firmly in the eyes and say you love me". The photos in Michael's and Albert's bedrooms reflect an inner tension between actual intimate experience and ideal objectification; this tension finds a counterpart in expectations of trust between friends as well as between men and women.

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<sup>4</sup> The freezer and the free electricity that went with a government house meant that in exchange for a share of the meat, Albert could also offer a service to anyone who bought whole goats or sheep, although this was usually confined to neighbours or relatives with salaried jobs.



Albert sometimes took me to the townships in the white, commercial farming dorps. Although this was invaluable for me as a way of getting to know his wide circle of friends and acquaintances, I found myself acutely embarrassed when his usual sensitivity and 'good manners' gave way to what seemed to me (and I expect the women he accosted) a loutish pestering of girls whom he'd obviously never met before. He would shout, often in English, come-ons such as: "Hey baby, what are you doing tonight - you look so good!" Or "How about it? Let's share love!" as we drove through the dusty streets of the townships. This was typical behaviour of many young Damara men and seemed to constitute nothing more significant than what would be involved in asking a stranger for food, or a casual acquaintance for a cigarette. Gossip about sexual liaisons were rife in Okombahe and Albert, although he was serious about his relationship with Sylvia, would often brag to me about his exploits, which he would in weaker moments admit were fantasies. Gossip finally got the better of him after Sylvia's baby was born and she 'hiked' to Okombahe to check out the rumours that Albert was having an affair with a girl from the secondary school. Although this was almost certainly not the case, these insistent allegations finally succeeded in driving a wedge between Albert and Sylvia, resulting in verbal fights and eventually Sylvia's return to her mother's house in Otjiwarongo.

To a large extent, such incidents were a symptom of the insecurity inherent in Albert and Sylvia's situation. Even Albert's occupation of his brother's house at Blau Berg was contested by some of his neighbours who complained that Blau Berg was built to house old people and families, not young single men. Each time we left the village for even a night or two, Albert would make elaborate plans to foil those he thought wanted to take over his house for themselves. Locks were constantly being changed, friends were asked to stay while he was away, and he rarely told anyone about his travelling plans in case this gave them the opportunity to either burgle or squat his house.

My association with Albert definitely influenced my standing with some of the village's traditional leaders: although never referred to openly, my contacts with several elders were curtailed on account of my friendship with Albert. He was looked upon by many 'respectable' members of the community, especially those in positions of power, as riff-raff, in spite of the fact that many of these same people were involved in petty criminality and blatant corruption.



*As to the future, my thoughts are wide*

Taken as a whole, Albert's photographs reflect his position in Okombahe as a young, single unemployed man with few close community ties or family connections. In contrast, **Christine Maletsky's** images and narratives are more concerned with women and children, with her family and close male relatives. She was born and grew up in Okombahe and her mother's family history is rooted here. Her photos portray the daily experience of a young married mother, struggling to create an independent household. Her insight into the lives of close friends and family give her photos a more intimate and personal quality than Albert's images.

She also makes pointed comments on the grind of her daily life: the image of an open window (23) poignantly expresses both her optimism and frustration. When she first came across this picture among her prints she improvised a story around it in order to hide the fact that one of her children had taken it by mistake and without her knowledge. She only admitted this to me during the opening of the exhibition after many people had praised her for the poignancy of the image and its caption:

I took this picture so that I can remember, someday when I am standing on my own feet and having a good life - when I am sitting down on my own chair, in a nice house built with bricks and proper windows - I will remember that once I stayed in a house like this one.

Maria Pietersen, the daughter of my nearest neighbour in Jansen, first introduced me to Christine, who was 28 years old. She cared for two young children of her own and four of her husband's children from a previous relationship. At the time, Christine and her children were living in her mother's home, along with several younger brothers, in a huddle of mud-brick buildings roofed with scraps of corrugated tin, which were situated on the western edge of the village overlooking the dry thorn veld, alluvial sand

flats, a ribbon of Ana trees fringing the Omaruru River and low granite hills in the distance. Christine's husband was often away from Okombahe for weeks at a time, prospecting for tin and tourmaline which are found scattered throughout the western reaches of Damaraland. On his occasional returns to Okombahe, they would move into a two-roomed mud-brick house adjacent to Christine's mother. Later that year, just as she was about to give birth to her third child, she was able to move into a house in Blau Berg when it was vacated Maria, who passed on this informal tenancy to her friend.

"We have a tough life - my husband tries to earn an income from prospecting and I work part-time in the Okombahe kindergarten. It is hard to survive and I can hardly explain how we do it": Christine and her husband's combined income averaged less than N\$200 (£30) per month and they often relied on Christine's mother who worked in the school hostel. It is hardly surprising that many of Christine's photographs are concerned with conditions of poverty: her mother preparing veld food (8), her uncle selling empty bottles (19), her grandfather whose pension has been withheld for several months (22). Many of her descriptions of hardship are oblique and mitigated by references to the simple pleasures of daily life - some of which are redolent with her own childhood memories: waiting by the fire for early morning coffee (10,11), the good, 'nutty' taste of baked grass-seed (8), the respite of a cool cloudy day in spite of the emaciated condition of the hobbled horses: "if you grew up on a farm you would be interested in this picture" (9).

Close-ups of friends and relatives incorporate stories about the problems she and her family encounter on a daily basis. These hardships are countered by narrative asides which betray an implicit affection for the people in her photographs, often in the form of amusing comments on circumstantial details such as her uncle's cigarette "which won't leave his mouth: His life is there, without it he will feel alone" (17). It is hard not to interpret her description of her uncle's affection for his cat (19) with her own feelings of affection towards her uncle. This is revealed in other ways, such as Christine's choice to focus on an economy of pleasure in her uncle's life - the sharing of tombo and tobacco with a friend. A similar theme is repeated in the image of her grandfather, sitting over a smoky fire waiting for water to boil for coffee (6): "He isn't worried about the smoke, in fact he is also smoking his pipe", but somehow the fact that her younger brother "forced



himself into the picture" belies her own concern about the future of her siblings and children and a fear that their lives may follow a pattern so common to the lives of her elders', one of disappointment and poverty. The life of her mother's sister (12) who lives 'alone' is laid bare in a few short comments which hint at the complex inter-generational dependence within families:

This is my only surviving grandmother, Maro Fistos (my mother's younger sister). She came to our house and asked for a little sugar; there is no-one else whom she can ask. We are the only people who will take care of her, although she also looks after one of her granddaughters...

Christine's respect for elders is epitomised in her portrait of the 'one-liner' !Guri-haseb (5) "... the sort of man who will not depend on others", and Ou Mika (13) her 'advisor' who is a devout member of the Evangelical Ebenizer Church ("with God every thing is possible"). Christine, who was brought up in the Catholic church told me that she was 'converted' to this small but growing Christian sect mainly because it stresses the importance of monogamy in marriage. She sees a stable married relationship to be of paramount importance for her family's future. While she also adheres to other strictures enforcing abstinence from drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco, but she holds no moral judgement over her neighbours in this regard (17 to 21). Christine's moral landscape depends on the continuity and stability conferred by her extended family, on the extension of this into the ideal of a monogamous marriage and a faith that this will eventually enable her to become independent and self-reliant.

Her close-ups (like Albert's) are all interior shots, reflecting an intimacy associated with the private space in her mother's or uncle's home (13, 16, 17, 22). The small number of photographs taken outside of a family context depict a public space in which objects are ordered and circulated in much the same way as in the more intimate setting of her home. The way in which her neighbours clean the area around their home (2) where rubbish "is piled up in one place so that anyone who wants to can pick through it for something that might have a little value" parallels the comment about her prized cupboard of wedding gifts: "Someday, if I get a better life, I will give them to my mother or my sister. . .".

Christine sold several prints and received many compliments about her photographs during the opening night of the exhibition in Windhoek. Afterwards, we met in Okombahe where I interviewed her for a feature for Namibia's feminist *Sister* magazine. I asked her what she had learned from the whole experience of taking part in the photography project and whether it had changed her outlook in any way. She answered me while nursing her new born baby girl, amidst the noise and bustle of her young children - she was obviously exhausted, but remained upbeat:

I'm interested in the future of my people, just as I'm interested in my own future. This opportunity to make photographs has shown me something important about looking at the present and thinking about my fate. Although the photographs are not important in themselves, when I began to think and talk about them I realised that there was much to be learned, that the history of a photo makes it real and interesting. Now when I think about my own future at times I am optimistic. I would like to complete my education and become someone, perhaps a teacher. I also know now that I have some talent as an artist and I am looking for a chance to develop that talent. But as always, money is a problem: everything is money, or rather the lack of it. Perhaps if I could afford to buy some goats and become a farmer this might help me to overcome some of these problems.

Although not impossible, the probability of achieving her ambition seemed so remote to me. A lack of opportunity, and powerlessness is inherent in so many young rural woman's situation: even were funding available for Christine to attend art school or teachers' training college in Windhoek, how would she be able to manage this under the weight of her maternal responsibilities? Creating an autonomous life, establishing an independent household is harder for women who generally have fewer employment opportunities and consequently depend on their extended family or marriage to expand their economic opportunities. Teen-age motherhood is a common burden and constraint on women's options for work. In Christine's case a lucky break for her husband or perhaps with the help of her extended family she could find a way to spend a year studying in Windhoek. Her optimism is tempered by a pragmatism common to many people in Damaraland - livestock farming is the most obvious option for economic advancement. But even this is subject to having first achieved some measure of stability in the form of a nucleus herd and the support of

either family or friends. This goal of achieving security and independence through farming in a marginal environment, plagued by droughts, thieves and the demands of reciprocity within impoverished extended families is a measure of the limitations inherent in Damaraland's economic landscape.



*After the rains came...*

**Willem and Willemina Hoeseb's** photographs portray a nuclear family who have achieved Christine's ambition - theirs is a story of success, independence and self-reliance based on livestock farming in one of Okombahe's many outlying settlements. As a couple they embody the ideal which Christine referred to in her statement about !Guri-haseb (5): " 'Do you know that your lifetime is in your own two hands?' He pointed to his hand and said: 'your money is here: if you know how to use your hands you will never be hungry'".

The Hoesebs live in Dawebtsaub ('tamarix well'), a small scattered settlement linked to Okombahe by a series of narrow donkey cart tracks which follow the Omaruru River down stream, winding next to and criss-crossing its deeply etched water course and green ribbon of vegetation, through the rugged broken escarpment and far out into the desert region of the pro-Namib (6 & 20). The settlements along this stretch of river are located in places where the ground water in the deep alluvial sand and gravel is brought close to the surface by underlying dike or sill rock intrusions which cut across the river channel intermittently. Wells are constructed on the river banks or in the river itself and water is lifted using buckets attached to long, counter weighted poles (*xui #khorib* ). Many of these sites have been permanently occupied by Damara farmers during the past century and were probably also used by pastoralists and hunters in pre-colonial times. Travelling through these homesteads west of Okombahe is like travelling into the past; the material artefacts of the twentieth century (diesel pumps, corrugated building materials, scrap metal and wire fencing)



diminish incrementally, replaced by unlined hand-dug wells, houses constructed of drift wood plastered with cow dung, small garden patches and kraals constructed of thorn branches. Signs of de-population, which is partly cyclical and drought related, partly a symptom of modernisation and urban drift, are seen in derelict homesteads and an increasing preponderance of old people.

Willem had lived in Dawebtsaub as a child, but had spent most of his adult life working as a semi-skilled employee of the Rossing uranium mine and latterly in a fish processing factory at Walvis Bay. During the 1980s he began to invest some of his savings in livestock and employed a relative to look after it at his family's abandoned homestead, but finally decided that he could make a better living by managing his stock himself. Willemina, whose family lived in the Khorixas area, had grown up with livestock and she was also a highly skilled and diligent farmer. Together they had built up a large herd of some 400 goats and sheep in ten years, starting from an initial investment in 20 animals.

Willem and Willemina's first film is a 'day-in-the-life' narrative which accurately reflects a typical stock-farmer's routine (1 -14).<sup>5</sup> The photo story depicts the beginning, middle and end of the working day by highlighting specific activities which punctuate the otherwise continuous work of herding the livestock into and back from the veld. The 'cold' of early morning in summer is actually a pleasure (1) which enhances the ritual enjoyment of a cup of tea (2) before embarking on the morning chores: making a careful check of every individual in a flock of 400 animals for immanence of birth and health disorders (3); marking and integrating older kids with the herd (4); milking (5); letting mothers suckle their young kids and lambs which have been segregated in separate pens and kept at home until the age of three or four months. All this takes time, and a highly developed attention to, and memory for detail. Several hours later, sometime during mid-morning and after a simple meal, the kraal is opened and the goats and sheep herded towards the veld(6). It is unusual that a couple and their young child would herd their animals together like this, but today they have done this for a combination of reasons: the desire to illustrate the fundamental structure of their working lives through the photo project; the opportunity to gather veld food after the rains; the presence of

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<sup>5</sup> They are atypical as a farming unit however, insofar as they lived as a self-contained nuclear family, and often managed their livestock without the help of hired labourers.

water in the veld necessitating more active herding; and just the sheer pleasure of experiencing the transient beauty of the greening landscape after the rains.

Normally, the daily round of herding is self-regulating: the farmer creates a routine around the hunger and thirst of his livestock which takes them away from home in the morning and brings them back in the afternoon. Goats and sheep often spend as much as 16 to 18 hours between late afternoon and mid-morning penned in kraals, consequently, when they are released they hurry to the veld where they graze and browse for 6 to 8 hours until their hunger is satisfied and their thirst brings them back to the homestead where they drink before being kraaled again for the night. During the short rains however, pools of water have collected in granite depressions so Willem and Willemina must be vigilant in herding their animals to and from this water, especially in seeing that they all return home in the evening.

The topic of rain and water is ubiquitous in Namibia, and especially in the dry, semi-desert western region of Damaraland. At the time that these photos were made, there was enough water in the veld to sustain the livestock, but it didn't last for long. Willem was busy digging a new well after the river had flooded and completely filled in the well he had dug the year before. A week of back-breaking work would be enough to dig a new well some 4 to 5 metres down into the hard-packed gravel and during the following months this was deepened by pick-axing laboriously into the hard calcrete base. Six months later, as the water table continued to drop, Willem was emptying this well using a rope and bucket, every six hours during the day and night in order to store enough water (about 1200 litres) in drums and troughs to meet the daily requirements of his thirsty stock. He often spoke to me of his plan to construct a permanent brick-lined well protected from floods but as another dry season wore on this investment of time and effort appeared dubious with the increasing possibility of renewed drought necessitating a move to another area with better grazing.

While all the images and many of Willem's captions hint at wider social relations, the photos firmly locate Willem, Willemina and their daughter Queenie, as the focused centre of their daily world. A sense of their self-reliance is exhibited in images of both their stock and the surrounding veld: Willem told me that "the drought lasted a very long time, but this year we had good rains and the grass is beginning to come out - it makes a man feel

nice, when his stock are healthy and growing". Willem is feeling 'fat' himself (7) and this good humour (and identification with his herd) is acted out and symbolised by the gift of his hat to his favourite ram, 'the chief' (*Gao-aob*) (14). This series of photographs encapsulates Willem and Willemina's personal identification with their livestock and the physical environment upon which they depend for their survival as an independent family. The photos of themselves and their livestock in the veld (7 - 13) are celebrations of the brief transformation of the veld after the rains and this lends a relaxed 'family outing' atmosphere to what otherwise might be a time of severe anxiety over the recurrent possibility of drought.

Willem (known by most people as *Matiba* or 'give mine for others') and Willemina were in many respects an unusual couple. In some ways they reminded me of more educated, well-connected and 'upwardly mobile' Damara speakers who I knew as teachers and civil servants. Often such 'middle-class' Damaras also own livestock, and are known in development jargon as 'weekend' or absentee farmers who typically see livestock as a secondary economic activity and a means of supporting extended family dependants by providing them with (low-paid) work as herders. Stories of family intrigue surrounding the mis-management of livestock owned by absentee farmers are rife in Damaraland and Willem's previous experience of entrusting his livestock to various family members were unexceptional in this regard. References to theft, deception, and mistrust dominated discussions regarding Damara labourers, whether involving family or not. The Hoesebs had managed to extricate themselves from this syndrome, common to many livestock owners, through self-reliance and by distancing themselves from their extended families. This attitude was also consistent with their deep suspicion of many of their neighbours.

One day Willem told me that a message had been broadcast over the radio informing him of his brother's sudden (and violent) death in Omaruru. Because this was now public knowledge he decided not to attend the funeral because it would present an ideal opportunity to anyone who might be waiting to steal some of his livestock. Both he and Willemina kept a constant eye on the movements of everyone in the vicinity of their homestead: when their newly purchased team of donkeys went missing Willem was convinced that they had been stolen by the same neighbour from whom he had bought them only a few weeks previously.



I was unwittingly involved in creating more mistrust between Willem and Linda Axakhoes's family who were close neighbours and 'friends'. I had stopped at Linda's on my way down river and had eaten a tasty meal of goat meat with her and her family. Later, I mentioned this to Willem in the course of a casual conversation about the welfare of various people on the river. It transpired that earlier in the day, he had seen Linda as he passed her house on his way to the shop in Okombahe - she had told him that they had nothing to eat, and since he had often shared meat with her family in the past, this lie caused a permanent rift in their relationship. Not only was this a blatant breach of neighbourly reciprocity, but Willem also wondered if they had lied because they were eating one of his goats!

Part of the difficulty in conveying the dynamics of social distrust is related to the complexity of describing the flux of population which occurs in rural farm settlements. During the year in which I visited Dawebtsaub a total of 28 adults lived there, but only between 7 and 15 adults were resident at any one time. Each homestead site had a recognised 'owner', who was often the family elder who had 'inherited' the usufruct, but such owners were often absent, their rights kept in tact by either other family members or labourers. The logic of tenurial practice stems from this continual movement of people and the temporary migration of entire families and their herds during times of drought. This population instability has the effect of dissolving any sense of collective, community responsibility. Thus, the character of settlements and the identities of individuals within them are to an extent determined by residence patterns and drought induced migration. The mere fact of this photographic documentation gives an impression of permanence and stability which is in many ways false: although the Hoeseb's homestead will continue to 'be there' (and to 'be theirs'), their lives are likely to change dramatically at some point in the near future - recurrent drought will see to that.

Not only are concepts of tenure, property relation and networks of exchange integrally bound up with a farming system heavily determined by environmental factors, but strategies of herd building are also only understandable from a perspective which takes environmental, social and economic considerations into account. When I first met Willem I was puzzled by the fact that his herd contained such a large proportion of 1 to 5 year old castrated goats. Rather than selling them in their prime at about 18 months of age and thereby avoiding the risk of losing many of them from

theft, disease or drought, Willem 'irrationally' kept this accumulated capital, alive on the hoof, rather than as cash in his bank account. This strategy was partly a result of poor marketing opportunities and partly a way of storing capital in a form which could not easily be spent. Finally, he sold all of his castrated and surplus male goats in February 1996 at the beginning of what promised to be a year of drought. With this cash, he bought a bakkie and started looking for opportunities to move his stock to areas of better grazing: rains had been slightly better further north and since Willemina's family lived near Khorixas, this connection would present an opportunity to migrate until conditions improved once again in Dawebtsaub.

The sociality inherent in migration, livestock marketing and regular visits to Okombahe or further afield to visit Willemina's family in Khorixas is intimated in their second film which is almost entirely composed of portraits of Willem, Willemina and Queenie presented in variety of more formal dress evoking a sense of their public personas and social status (15, 16, 20). Attention to personal appearance and dress is just as important in rural Namibia as it is globally, as a means of conveying distinctions of value, class and public image: suits, jewellery, handbags and a brief-case are all references to roles which constitute important facets of Willem's and Willemina's personal identity outside of the isolated setting of their (transient) home. These portraits are defined by place and work (this series was sited either in front of the house, or near the kraal) and serve not only to reinforce the cohesiveness of family identity but also embody the continuity of personal history, a sense of pride in their achievements and their hopes for an uncertain future. Other more informal 'domestic' photos of Queenie and her mother betray a sense of pride and attachment to place serving as important markers for personal memories and family affections: "Queenie is so small now, she is only 3 years old but someday, when she grows up to maybe 16 years old, then I will be 66, an old man, and I can show her what she looked like when she was young".



*Swallowing your dreams*

The majority of photos taken by the Lucia and Tekla /Goagoses are family portraits, situated either in their garden, in the midst of their homestead, or in the 'beautiful' surroundings of the Omaruru River. In spite of the formality of many of the poses, this group of photographs conveys the deeply personal atmosphere inherent in this large, relaxed and convivial family group. What we see in front of the camera also reflects what is going on behind it: Lucia and her daughter Tekla have controlled the staging of these portraits, many of which are of themselves: the camera seems to be a disembodied family eye, free-floating between children, adults and in-laws. The portraits display few variations of social or spatial distance: a homogeneous quality of either casual impassivity or muted humour pervades the interaction between photographer and photographed. This family is composed of three mutually dependent generations, a stable core of whom were born here. The /Goagoseb family have occupied this site intermittently for at least 5 generations.

Tekla is explicit about her reasons for taking family photos: "it makes me think of my two sister's husbands who are now dead" (4); "If someone ever asks about any of King David Goreseb's children, I can show them this picture of his first born" (9); "Our family is scattered all over Namibia, so if some of them come here some day, I can show them this picture of my father" (13). Photography becomes an 'inventory of mortality' (Sontag 1980: 70) embracing a sense of family unity which is grounded in continuity and a sense of place. This theme is reiterated in photos of cleaning grass-seeds gathered from ants nests (*tsaui*). Three women sit in close proximity; Lucia emphasises the hard work which this involves (2) and Tekla highlights the continuity which it represents: "I learned to gather *tsaui* from my mother



and father when I was small..." (14, 15). The collection of wild honey and traditional dancing are also special activities, standing as conscious symbols of embodied practice within a trans-generational cultural continuity.

Lucia only hints at the boundedness of family life by referring to her neighbours and their cattle: "sometimes they sell their milk or give it to relatives" (7). What is said by omission is that she never tastes this milk: few ties of co-operation or exchange exist between Lucia's family and that of her nearest neighbours. The neighbours who do create affective bonds tend to be hired labourers such as Polis, the young Ovambo gardener (Tekla 8), who come to the area, usually on a temporary basis, without either the responsibilities or the opportunities inherent in kinship networks.

Jansen is roughly half way between Okombahe and Dawebtsaub; it is larger than Dawebtsaub but similar in many respects: both have livestock farming economies, some gardening and a stable core of residents and 'owners' with a dynamic internal population flux. I met the /Goagosebs during the first few days after moving to Jansen. At the time I was almost totally dependent on my translator Annatjie, to help me make my introductions and communicate with my new neighbours. At first I confined myself to looking around, counting livestock and looking through all the new gardens which had been created as a result of a newly established bore hole, reservoir and system of pipes which now made irrigated gardening possible for eight of the settlement's ten homesteads. I quickly became used to speaking to people through Annatjie, but as I was questioning Ouma Lucia about one of her crops, she suddenly replied in English! Perhaps she wished that she had kept this ability to herself as I plied her with questions and comments in my excitement at being able to communicate with her directly. It was almost 50 years since she learned to speak English when, as a teen-ager, she was sent to a Catholic convent in Lesotho: she had used her English only sporadically since that time.

Tekla spoke to me in simple Damara using elaborate mime and sign language; she resolutely refused my repeated offers to teach her some English. It was only several months later that I discovered her linguistic ability almost by mistake during a dispute between Tekla and my neighbours. The rota for watering the gardens was a constant source of dispute and ill-will between several factions in Jansen. I had been working with Ouma Ida Pietersen in her garden when Tekla appeared, angry and upset, shouting about how the water had been cut off while she was in the

middle of irrigating her crops. The ensuing argument between Tekla and Ouma Ida was conducted in Damara and Afrikaans, but as it grew heated it was interjected with exclamations of 'fuck off' from Tekla who at that point seemed on the verge of physical violence. When I casually remarked to Tekla that her English was very good when she was angry, she turned to me with a look of embarrassment and broke into laughter, apologising to Ouma Ida and me in English. She never spoke to me in English again, but continued to teach me Damara and maintain our friendship through jokes, mime and sharing small items of food and favours.

My relationship with Lucia was more serious and practical. She spoke to me as if I were an impartial witness to the ongoing injustices of communal life, its poverty, insecurity and mistrust between neighbours. Yet I sensed a motive on her part, which was aimed at making me the mouth-piece of her complaints either in my role as naive gossip or as an 'outsider with access to authority'. To voice her complaints, to confront the neighbours who controlled her family's use of water would bring with it the risk of open conflict, insecurity and further exclusion. Her deep conservatism seemed at times horribly ironic, especially when she ruefully reminisced about the stability and social order conferred on Okombahe by the past regime - 'when the Boers ruled over us'. Initially I was deeply puzzled by both her reticence in speaking out and her marginal position within the community of Jansen, after all she had lived here for much of her life, her husband Johannes had been born in this same homestead and the /Goagoseb family had resided in Jansen longer than any other family.

Several factors contributed to Lucia's insecurity. Apart from the fact that she and her husband were now physically less capable of looking after their meagre assets, their struggle to survive the drought of 1991-2 had seriously reduced their ability to cope. Much of their cash and material reserves had been depleted over a period of three years when they migrated from Jansen in the hopes of finding better grazing for their livestock. They had moved four times during this period, first 30 kilometres west along the Omaruru River to a less populated settlement where competition for grazing was less intense, but as the drought deepened they moved again to various settlements south of the river. Each time they moved meant dismantling and rebuilding their huts, constructing a new kraal and developing working relationships with their new neighbours. In the event, their herd was decimated anyway and they moved back to Jansen in 1994 just as a garden

project was nearing completion which offered the opportunity of an alternative to their dependence on livestock. The fact that they had been absent during the protracted planning and organisational stages of the garden project contributed to their marginal position with regard to the implementation of the project. Theirs was the last garden to receive a pipeline and their call on available water was weakest. Lucia and Tekla's photos were taken at the time when their first crops were nearing maturity, but conflicts with neighbours over access to water took the edge off their pride and put their newly found food security in some doubt.

Lucia was the *de facto* head of a large, elderly family group. Her husband Johannes was crippled with arthritis. He often joked to me that he was 'finished' (*toago* ) and then laugh as he pointed to his groin and reiterated: "*Toago* ". His two older sisters lived in separate households nearby - Angela had a form of Turrets syndrome which was controlled by heavy doses of tranquillisers which made her completely dependent on Lucia's care (Tekla 9). The visiting doctor knew that Angela's condition was chronic but consistently gave out only a week or two's medication at a time, I suspect more for Lucia's benefit rather than for Angela's. When this ran out, Angela was obstinate and outspoken - she made Lucia's life a misery by continually contradicting her; she swore and spoke without restraint, uttering the first thoughts which came into her head with an incisive rude wit which cut through any residual social niceties. She would partially undress herself in front of strangers and roll around on the ground, then sit up and act completely normally for a few minutes. Her sedated state was spent mainly lying in her hut, coughing and muttering incomprehensible oaths. Fistolene her sister, was morose but capable of looking after herself (10) and lived nearby in a separate hut and cooked for herself on her own hearth.

Tekla was unable to bear children and had adopted her sister's last born daughter when she returned from Kavango three years previously. She and her 'boy-friend' (*/aib* ) Benjamin and to a lesser extent Lucia, were the only able bodied adults in the family. It was just possible for seven people to survive on N\$540 (£90) per month and to pay the wage of a herder from their four state pensions but this left nothing for contingencies such as medical expenses, clothing or parts for the donkey cart. I never knew them to sell any of their livestock although they had a herd of some 150 goats. In the main, any culled animals were distributed among Lucia's children and grandchildren in Okombahe, Walvis Bay and Windhoek or consumed



during school holidays when up to seven grandchildren came to stay with Ouma Lucia and Johannes.

The Goagoseb's goats were all herded and kraaled together although each individual family member owned animals which were identified by distinctive ear-marks. In common with the majority of livestock farmers in Damaraland, their success in maintaining a herd was based on their experience and skill balanced against the limitations inherent in this drought-prone environment. The amount of care and attention given to livestock was tempered by a common sense law of diminishing returns: the depredations of drought, outbreaks of contagious disease such as *Pasturellosis*, predation by jackals and sporadic stock theft meant that after a certain point, the efforts of farmers seemed to make little difference to the 'natural' reproductive capacities of the herd. Since male animals are not kept separate from the herd, the reproductive cycle of small stock is in effect controlled by climatic events and the natural seasonal cycle of small stock fertility. While kidding normally takes place during a concentrated period during the early spring and summer, births occur over an extended period of many months. This necessitates a labour intensive farming system where kids are separated from their mothers after a few days and are only allowed to suckle briefly during the morning before the main herd is taken to the veld and again in the evening when they return. The skill involved in matching over a hundred new born kids to their mothers during the height of the kidding season, twice a day, is a testament to the observational skills common to Damara farmers.

The /Goagosebs are representative of many farming families throughout Damaraland. Having lived much of their lives as communal farmers, the situation they find themselves in as they grow old is increasingly affected by the socio-economic changes associated with modernisation: the fragmentation of families along generational lines as children seek wage employment in towns and the effects of recent severe drought which have plunged elderly farmers into deepening poverty. The high unemployment rates throughout Namibia mean that for many elderly farmers, their pensions are the final safety net for themselves as well as for their children and grandchildren.

In many ways, Lucia and Tekla's lives in Jansen are rich compared with many of Okombahe's population who had neither livestock, gardens or a large extended family network. Tekla seemed resigned to the fact that "none

of us have jobs" - she qualified her regret by listing all the things which made life possible: "we raise goats, we garden, we gather *tsaui* and veld foods after the rains, sometimes we brew tombo from honey. I would like to have a job but what can we do? Thinking about the future is like swallowing your dreams".



*Jealousy/ gossip*

Christolene Goses's photos illustrate another variation on previous narrative themes invoking a sense of personal identity based on affective family relationships and the desire for self-reliance. Hers is the story of a young woman in the process of setting up her own household. She and her boy-friend Bernardo depict their recently established house and kraal as a site where social interaction with family, neighbours and friends is contingent on their fragile economic independence sustained through a small herd of goats and their ability to make business with their donkey cart and horses. But first and foremost Asi's desire to consolidate a stable relationship with Bernardo is objectified in her portrait of him as the 'owner and main character of the house' (1). He is portrayed in terms of how he is living: "he is farming with goats and has a dog". The arrangement of a new ghetto-blaster, placed neatly on a folded cloth as if to dissociate it from the prosaic connotations of the Jerry-can supporting it, suggests a lack of closure surrounding the meaning of his role as husband/farmer. The tokens of a global economy, tape machine, track-suit bottoms, trainers and plastic containers are otherwise seamlessly continuous with the open landscape, the partially constructed kitchen shelter, Bernardo's shirt and hat cast casually on the ground, the synthesis of a silver cross with a Rastafarian necklace and Bernardo's gaze into the ambiguous eye of the camera. Christolene's second photograph turns its gaze outwards from her house framing her neighbours and a child standing in front of Bernardo's cart full of fire-wood and water containers. This image serves as an affirmation of their ability to survive as

an independent household as do several other photographs which detail their livestock and business activities (7,8,18,19).

At the time these pictures were taken, Christolene and Bernardo had lived in Khorī !Gaos (the place of Khorī - the evergreen *Salvadora* tree), for only two months. Their nearest neighbour, one of Christolene's distant aunts, lived about two hundred metres away from their new homestead - this kinship link was one factor which made it possible for them to move to this dispersed settlement of approximately 25 households situated within an hour's donkey cart ride from Okombahe. One of the reasons Christolene gave me for their decision to move here was precisely the fact that neither she nor Bernardo had any close family relations in Khorī !Gaos. It was near enough to Okombahe for Asi to visit her mother and sisters but far enough away so their newly established house and kraal was separate and distinct, distanced from the daily demands of responsibility and sharing within her large extended family. It was also a place where their livestock was safer from the continual threat of theft which is a constant source of concern for farmers living in Okombahe village.

Their interest and appreciation of history, as embedded in the landscape surrounding Khorī-Gaos, is recorded in several pictures of a nearby abandoned mine and "an old spring where our ancestors took their water" (3 -5); the sense of rupture occasioned by remains of the 'white man's' mining industry is slowly healed as the veld takes over this site where 'freelance' Damara miners pick over the area for fragments of tourmaline crystal. A sense of the historical significance of the present is implicit to many of the images and occasionally referred to in texts such as that which describes a young boy riding a donkey in the green veld: "it looked so nice - another day I will remember that our people were riding donkeys like this" (6).

Christolene's tongue is firmly in her cheek when she describes 'showing my man how to milk. . ." (7) and much of the interview around this set of photographs was taken up in laughter and jokes. While such gendered divisions do exist, they are weak and flexible - a conscious irony is associated with the delimiting of roles defined by gender. Christolene's comments relating to Bernardo's grandmother - "how an old Damara woman gets up in the morning" (10) are suffused with humour and a similar irony about gender: "she milks the goats, makes porridge for the grandchildren, feeds the dogs and then lights her pipe".



I first met Christolene and Bernardo in Arixá Ams, a remote settlement some 70 kilometres to the west of Okombahe. Here, at the south-eastern foot of the Brandberg (9 & 11) and on the edge of the open grass-lands of the pro-Namib, was where Bernardo's family had lived, at least since the early 1950's. His grandfather was the first settler here, having migrated from Sesfontein, several hundred kilometres to the north, at the time when the Okombahe reserve was expanded. Christolene's pictures of Arixá Ams (9 - 13) were taken six months later, on a brief trip we made together to revisit her 'in-laws'. During this interval, the population of Arixá Ams had changed dramatically and several new families had moved here as a result of the previous year's drought.

The importance of personal names in indicating social relationships is hinted at in Christolene's comments about some of Arixá Ams' new residents - the man who has been contracted to build Bernardo a new donkey cart is known as /Unob (nameless) "maybe because he was the kind of guy who always refused to tell anyone his real name" and his (nameless) wife, "who refused to let me take a picture of her up close" reflects the boundaries which attend the relationship of unnamed strangers. In contrast to this, her in-law and friend Lydia told her "I want you to take a photo of us in our own house, even if it is bad and I haven't anything". Her explanation of the photos of her mother's garden (14-17) is similarly infused with statements of affinity, made explicit in the namelessness of her mother's hired helper who is referred to as simply employee (!*gab*) or 'the other man'. Christolene made a point of insisting that her Christian name was used to identify her photographs in the exhibition rather than her childhood Damara name 'Asi' by which she was known within her community of family, friends and acquaintances, thus signifying her legitimate place as an adult in this wider public context.

The double bind inherent in many extended family relationships is mirrored in Christolene's aside about her sister's children: "I want everyone to know I have a great family" (20) and the story about her cousins, the 'tough guys' (21): "They are very naughty but in fact, we understand one another, at least I understand them". Extended family relationships are fraught with conflicting demands and opportunities which are continually negotiated in an environment of material poverty: Asi's stable relationship with her female relatives is contrasted with the instability inherent in her tenuous relationship to many of her male relatives. This ambiguity of

affinity is reflected in the portraits of Bernardo's aunt and her children (22) which conveys the difficulties of single mother's lives: "This family is making money only from the *poka* (alcohol) which Magdalena distils from grass-seed (*tsau*) - this provides all the income for the family's food". Their facial expressions are penetrating and hard, similar to that of the 'tough guys', but here they are posed deliberately in front of a small bright patch of flowers which alleviates the drab colourless surroundings of their homestead in Okombahe.

By comparison, Christolene and Bernardo's outlook is portrayed as optimistic and positive: they take pride in their ability to survive as an independent household in spite of the fact that this depends almost entirely on a small herd of goats and the meagre earnings from selling wood and hiring out their donkey cart. But behind the up-beat commentaries of Christolene's photos is a story of marital tension, and severe economic hardship. At the time, both were in their mid-twenties having lived together off and on since their late teens. Asi had given birth to two children, one of whom had died in infancy and the other was being raised by a sister who lived in Okombahe where he attended primary school. In exchange, Christolene cared for her sister's youngest child.

When I initially met Asi in Arix Ams, I was unable to communicate with her (or anyone else in the settlement) through more than a basic exchange of a few Damara and English words. I helped with the daily chores of separating goats, milking, collecting firewood, making the occasional trip to the veld to collect grass seeds and we often ate together. During the month which I camped here Bernardo was sometimes absent for several days visiting his other girl-friend in Uis. Christolene returned to her mother's house in Okombahe soon after this and I met her only six months later just after she had moved to Khor-i-Gaos. During the course of the following year I saw both her and Bernardo frequently and with the help of an interpreter and a relationship of growing trust I became aware of the extent of misapprehension, distrust and gossip which surrounded their relationship and which began to involve me as well.

During the year in which I stayed in Jansen, several stories which Asi told me began to make sense in relation to her foundering 'marriage'. One day she told me a long detailed story of how she had hiked to Omaruru to buy some shoes for her son. On the way she was given a lift by a white south African miner who befriended her, gave her some money for her

child's shoes and took her to meet his wife and children living in the comfortable 'white' residential area of the town. A few months later, Asi complained to me about feeling ill, and having visited several doctors who diagnosed her as being anaemic. It turned out that she was pregnant and: Bernardo was convinced that the child she was carrying was the result of her relationship with the white man from Omaruru, or me! Asi's pregnancy became the catalyst for mistrust and a growing lack of commitment on Bernardo's part as he began to spend more of his time back in Uis and with his family in Arix Ams. My friendship with Asi seemed to become even more suspect in the eyes of Asi's friends and neighbours in the light of Bernardo's behaviour and although I was fairly immune to such idle gossip, Asi was not and it became more and more difficult to meet as casual and relaxed acquaintances. When Asi's baby was born, there was nothing obvious in its appearance to suggest that Bernardo was not the father, but by this time, his relationship with Asi had deteriorated to such a degree that their future as a couple was in serious doubt: their homestead in Khor !Gaos was unoccupied and their herd split in two. Asi was living with her mother in Okombahe again and her despair and depression was barely disguised by her devotion to her new daughter and her normally vivacious disposition. Rumours and gossip continued to erode her self-image as if they had a life of their own. It was bad enough that her efforts to establish a stable independent household had failed, that she was penniless and once again dependent on her mother for support, but even her status and reputation were being actively taken away from her. This loss of status seemed attendant on the levelling tendency of gossip, a symptom of this socio-economic environment fraught with insecurity and contested loyalties; a social control reflecting the dynamics of a communal identity rooted in the interdependency of poverty.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Gordon discusses the function of gossip in Okombahe using a class analysis, but also emphasises the "individual's priority over his [sic] family group" (1972: 46) where gossip becomes a function of the 'intimate connection between kin and social imperatives of economic survival, leading to an imprecision in the definitions of who is and who is not kin because the imperatives of economic survival are themselves constantly changing" (Fuller 1993: 216).





*Leaving home*

It was at the beginning of my fieldwork in Okombahe when I first met **Diana Gawanges**. We were introduced to each other by Maria Pietersen, the daughter of Ouma Ida in Jansen. Anna, my interpreter, had struck up a friendship with Maria, and had spent the day together washing clothes. I agreed to take them to Maria's boy friend's house at the secondary school in Okombahe that the evening so they could use his electric iron and electric lights. For Maria, it was also an excuse to elude the restrictions of home life, to relax with friends and to drink a beer or two. This is where I first met Diana. Maria, Anna and Diana were all in their early twenties and each, in their own way, were trying to leave home permanently. My first impression of Diana (everything about Okombahe at this time was infused with first impressions) was that of a young attractive self-contained woman who was proud, even aloof. She refused to speak to me and avoided eye contact as well, which made me feel awkward as there were just the four of us, listening to music and talking in David's two-roomed house. It seemed as though she pointedly declined to engage with my clumsy attempts to converse in rudimentary Damara, but in retrospect it is more likely that the combination of my poor grasp of the language and her expectation that a white man would never speak Damara made her deaf to my attempts to communicate. She spoke Afrikaans but not English and I later came to realise that this set her apart from Maria and Anna who she considered to be more worldly and experienced.

It was around this time that I mentioned the photography project to Maria who was enthusiastic and said she would introduce me to some of her friends who would be keen to take part. Were it not for this I probably would never have found out how shy and vulnerable Diana was under a veneer of what I took to be her imperious manner. I might have been the first, or at least one of the few white men Diana had ever met. The ramifications of this are probably incalculable when considered in the light

of Namibia's history of colonialism. At the time, I had no idea of the extent to which an inverted racism affected many people's reactions to me on first meeting. In thinking about it now, I am reminded of the terrified reactions of small children and babies to my pale skin, blue eyes and strange features: their shock and ensuing screams were the outward symptoms of an almost atavistic nightmare in which I appeared as some primeval and alien force, which in a sense, was accurate and true. I became the personified 'other'. In the case of children however, it didn't take long to overcome these perceptions of physical difference; with adults it was sometimes a different story and I felt as though my skin colour and all that this implied remained a perpetual spectre standing between us. This became one of the most dispiriting aspects to being white and living in Damaraland, not so much because of the ever present issue of race, but because it often seemed impossible to distinguish where racial prejudices began and ended within the politics of daily social life. So when Maria took me to Diana's home on the outskirts of the village a week or two later, after she had spoken to Diana about the photography project, I was apprehensive about how we would form a working relationship.

In the event, Diana was reticent and shy as she listened carefully to what had by now become Anna's deftly delivered sermon on the basic principles of photographic technique. My initial impression of Diana was quickly altered as it became apparent that she was frightened of me, and somewhat daunted by the prospect of being in control of a new technology, the camera. I imagine that she felt a complex mixture of awe, intimidation and a resentment regarding the strength of her own involuntary reaction to me; if we had more time together this tension would probably have relaxed into a more informal relationship. Unfortunately for me, Diana left Okombahe to work as a hostel cleaner at a distant mining town shortly after she took these photographs; I was only able to interview her briefly six months later when she returned to her mother's house during a holiday.

Since I had so little contact with either Diana or her family I can only conjecture as to the context of her photo stories. Some of the pathos of her family life is conveyed by four photos showing some of the daily chores and dramas enacted in the small fenced off yard in front of her family's house: her mother's seemingly endless job of washing clothes for a large extended family (2); her father's frustration at the irresponsibility of his children (3) and the crude violence associated with alcohol abuse (4). She seems to

express this daily grind through an ironic visual metaphor: "Today my mother killed a chicken and the children are plucking it. As they were doing this, another chicken was looking at what was happening and this struck me as tragic and funny" (7). It is almost as if Diana is suggesting that this image is a metaphor for both her family and social life generally: is she the chicken watching her family being plucked, or was she thinking of us, as voyeurs of the incomprehensible reality of her life?

The public space of the village shops, restaurant and church is a place to escape the strictures and tensions of family life and to meet friends and relax (1), or to exchange favours (6). The issue of drinking is highlighted again by contrasting the social behaviour of dagga (marijuana) smokers and distinguishing the different sense of space created by these two forms of social interaction (5): "smokers stand around and in groups and talk, while drinkers sit separately and watch the scene or quarrel". Diana depicts her friends and the youth of Okombahe generally engaged in drinking and smoking although she herself was not a dagga smoker and probably only drank occasionally<sup>7</sup>.

Diana's images of life in Okombahe oscillate between the space of her family home and the public space of shops, church and village square. In terms of composition, structure, distance and framing, there is little to differentiate these two domains. A subject common to both and dominating the majority of her twenty odd pictures (only nine were reproduced for the exhibition) is the role of women as providers, workers (6), organisers (8) and even bosses. Even though she refers to the women in one photograph as "drying onions at Michael's shop", it is his wife Mandi who employs and works along side them. While women cook, wash and work men are only seen peripherally as gravitating around these female activities. The men depicted here are either her father, her contemporary male friends, the old men waiting for the church's food relief or her family's employees who look after some livestock in a small settlement outside of Okombahe.

In spite of the fact that I never had a chance to extend my relationship with Diana, her photographs gave me some insight into the situation of many young single women in Okombahe. The ease with which she and her friends negotiate all the pleasures and limitations of 'hanging out in

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<sup>7</sup> Alcohol and dagga both carry negative social connotations within Namibia's predominantly Christian moral discourse. While many people consume alcohol openly, the extent of dagga consumption is masked by the added stigma of it being an illegal substance.



Okombahe', belie<sup>s</sup> an underlying apprehension relating to a highly uncertain future and a dearth of opportunity in the present asserts itself. The fates of Diana's older relatives are all too apparent in the photographs: poorly paid manual labour and domestic chores give way to daily food queues, charity and the state pension. What are Diana's prospects in the "New Namibia" where the convergence of opportunity with her skill and experience is unlikely to promote her career beyond the menial job of hostel worker with a monthly pay of around N\$250 (£35)?



*Petty politics and "Poor man water die"*

In many ways, **Erwin Tsuseb** represents an aspect of social life in Okombahe which consistently eluded me: in spite of the fact that each of my meetings with Erwin were engaged enough for me to give him two cameras and two sets of photographs, he consistently avoided talking in any depth about his photos or himself. Although at each of these four meetings we arranged to get together again at a more 'convenient' time, he assiduously avoided keeping these appointments. This and the poor quality of many of his photos (which were under-exposed interior shots), made it difficult to justify including more than six of Erwin's images in the exhibition. The selection was entirely a subjective one on my part, based on how the images affected me emotionally (1) or on how they made a narrative series from my knowledge of the context in which the photos were taken (2 & 3; 4, 5 & 6). My relationship with Erwin and my interpretations of his images are indicative of my limited understanding of several key social institutions in Okombahe which were the subjects of many of his photographs: the social networks surrounding 'traditional' and political leaders along with the dominant businessmen and the authority of the church.

Erwin was in his late twenties and had lived in Okombahe for only four years. He was born and grew up in Walvis Bay and then moved to Uis where he attended secondary school. Several close relatives of both his

father and mother lived in Okombahe, including the wife of the local councillor. It was probably this connection that brought Erwin to the village with the prospect of employment or at least some patronage from his 'powerful' uncle. One immediate benefit of this connection was the occupancy of a government house with running water and free electricity. This was situated in the 'street' of sixteen neatly spaced township style houses which had been built for government employees such as teachers, the nurse and various technicians working for the Department of Water Affairs and the Ministry of Local Government and Housing. Erwin's house was adjacent to the councillor's large residence known as the 'People's House' (2 & 3). Like many of Okombahe's residents, Erwin also owned livestock which was looked after by members of his extended family on a 'post' not far from the village. Cash income from his part-time assistance to the councillor and the sale of three or four goats each year gave him a modest income of about N\$150 (£25) per month.

Although his income was relatively low, his meticulous dress, his relatively high standard of education (Standard 10), a reasonable fluency in English, his participation in church functions and his association with the councillor, the community 'activator' and the dominant shop owner conferred a degree of status usually aligned with high earning professionals such as the teachers and technicians among whom he lived. Several of his photographs depict the interiors of the 'affluent' homes of professionals (government employees and businessmen) who comprise an emerging 'middle class' in Okombahe. One such photo, for instance, portrays a young woman with curlers in her hair, standing beside an electric stove in a 'modern' kitchen, complete with spice rack, electric grill and kettle, brightly painted kitchen cupboards and work tops with matching canisters labelled 'flour', 'sugar' etc. Other photos show the same woman standing behind the cash register in the new shop where everything from cosmetics, jewellery, deodorants, false hair, toys, hardware, sweets, tobacco, potato crisps, tinned fish, long-life milk and fresh bread are sold. Other photos feature the headman's bakkie crossing the receding waters of the flooding river during the rainy season or the shop-owner's bakkie and trailer being loaded with bricks made by the women's co-operative. These and other similar images of comparative affluence make a stark contrast to Erwin's pictures of drought relief food distributions at the People's House where the elderly, pregnant

women and children under five were eligible for 'luxuries' such as oil, tinned fish and a month's supply of mealy meal.

Mention must be made of the relationship between the small coterie of Okombahe's church, civic and traditional leaders in order to understand Erwin's situation and possibly his attitude towards me. By the end of my stay in Okombahe in March 1996, a ground-swell of popular discontent at the way the combined leadership were handling the community's resources emerged with the informal creation of a new, local political party called "Poor Thirsty People Have Had Enough" (*†Âu ta go /gâsa khoeb ta //gam //ô* , or literally: 'I had enough poor man water die'). Among other things, a sizeable faction of the predominantly poor in Okombahe wanted to protest at the way certain state and donor resources were being misappropriated by a few powerful individuals. One of these concerned the distribution of drought relief food. Allegations that community leaders were disbursing this among their extended family, selling it on the black market or using it as payment to herders and employees were rife in Okombahe<sup>8</sup>. It also became known that the headman, the councillor, the community activator and the Lutheran minister had conspired to redistribute goats that were meant for poor farmers who had lost all their stock during the 1992 drought, amongst themselves, their families and girl friends. The misappropriation of funds from the church sponsored 'community' ostrich farming project, the collusion between the councillor and a local shop keeper in protecting criminals who committed theft and even rape, the use of government cars for private journeys and for poaching game were some of the more salient scandals which had been brewing during the time I had been trying to engage Erwin in the photography project.

Erwin's avoidance of me was typical of all those involved with the distribution of government and donor resources. The community activator was assiduously evasive; his assistant, the volunteer Ghanaian development officer would only respond to my interest in the area's development projects with banal assertions that everything was wonderful; the councillor made promises to meet with me which were constantly broken without any explanation and the dominant business men in Okombahe would merely snarl at my attempts at civility because it was patently obvious that I was hanging around with people who had little or nothing to do with the upper

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<sup>8</sup> Such rumours and allegations were common in all the drought relief distribution centres in Damaraland during the period between 1992 and 1995.



echelons of the village's petty power brokers. The implicit danger of associating with me resided in my 'neutral' position as a researcher, as someone who would undoubtedly ask awkward questions: for Erwin to be seen socialising with me would call into question his loyalty to the councillor and the patronage network on which he depended for his small income and future prospects. Whether or not this adequately explains Erwin's apparent 'dislike' for me, it does coincide with a pattern of behaviour which I associate with power relations in Damara villages. And, it coincides with the confusion which I discussed in relation to Diana and inverted racism: both symbolic and economic power has a deep significance in social interaction. My confusion about people's motivations and intentions is almost certainly not particular to me as an outside white male researcher, rather it is indicative of the local politics of social interaction generally.



*Drink, Sex, Theft and a Christening*

**Christian Uiseb** was a 'natural' photo-journalist. As soon as he heard about the project, he approached me and in broken English explained that he wanted to 'show Okombahe like it is'. I remained somewhat sceptical of his intentions, partly because of the uncompromising manner in which he addressed me. The admixture of respect and irony inherent in his insistence in calling me 'Masterman', in spite of the obvious embarrassment with which I responded to this, was symptomatic of an irreverence which he applied to social norms generally. But the depth of his iconoclastic vision was only revealed to me when he spoke at length about his photographs. His photo stories revolve around neighbours, friends and family and contextualise some of the fundamental subjects of village gossip: food, alcohol, tobacco, sex and theft. The directness of his visual and textual treatment of these

subjects is made ironic through the contradiction of his apparent detachment as a story teller with the affective bonds which he betrays as a photographer.

Christian (otherwise known as /Igili) was in his mid to late twenties, employed as a gardener, and lived with his parents in a corrugated iron shack on the outskirts of the village. He chose to follow distinct but related themes in each of his two films. In the first, he characterises and catalogues a series of social interactions based around the issues of work, drinking, and theft. These images depict the places along /Igili's route to and from work, over a mile of scattered homesteads along the dusty track which runs parallel to the Omaruru River and the garden plots along its banks. He uses peoples' home names to characterise his narratives: 'Rubbish Master' is weeding his garden; 'My Father' is being bossed around by his wife and children; 'Told Each Other' is arguing with a customer over payment for petrol; 'Slave Of Everyone' is overjoyed because she has received her monthly wages; 'Warthog' turns on the photographer angrily. It is as if Christian set out to reinforce common stereotypes of social dysfunction which are associated with rural Damara speakers: drunkenness, theft, lying, family fragmentation, and sexual licentiousness.

The intentionality of his photo images is revealed through a welter of visual and narrative detail which catalogue the minutiae of domestic life and its inherent drama from moment to moment. An example of this is found in the image of a woman preparing pumpkins in a pot (3), who "was somewhat under the influence of liquor. She was talking to herself and I became interested in her story [. . . ]": this story, like many others he tells, is about drinking. "She had been arguing with her husband about the strength of the tombo and he said: 'It was just a shit drink!' but she replied 'Ai! It was a nice drink that I had', and so on . . . ". In the following picture (4) we catch up with the story about an hour later, after the children have arrived home from school and eaten ("chopped") the cooked pumpkin, whereupon their sister and mother who were too slow to eat from the pot, resign themselves to their hunger. It hardly matters whether or not this story is 'true'. Its significance lies in the almost fairy-tale quality of detail conveying social roles and stereotypical relationships: the husband and wife quarrelling over the quality of liquor, the mother cooking food for her children, her children eating it all up without regard for their siblings.

A series of photos showing men gardening (2, 5 - 8) convey another amoral angle on men's social relationships and daily preoccupations. /Igili

tells us humorously that a man's relationship to his wife isn't dissimilar to that of his relationship with his boss: he follows orders but grumbles and cheats when he can. Each image is a cameo of some aspect of village life where alcohol and tobacco often dominate the story-line. Here, the subplot concerns status and reciprocity: Dadi complains that his children won't help him in the garden (5), Walter craves tobacco but is too proud to ask for any. . (6).

The amoral tone which characterises /Igili's narratives finds full expression in his stories about sheep theft (10). We are made to believe a whole constellation of details which exist outside of the frame of the image involving the presence of police and two other accomplices in the sheep theft which had just been perpetrated. We are even told what the man in the picture is thinking, as if /Igili had some extraordinary insight into the situation, which of course he did. Later, /Igili told me about his own, recent experience of being caught stealing sheep with two of his neighbours, of being interrogated by the police and (unlike the clever thieves in the photograph) made to pay a fine and given a criminal record in court.

Eating, drinking, theft and sex are the headline stories, which in the second film, he intensifies through a series of interior shots made over a 24 hour period, mostly inside his own house. The plot running behind this series of photos is concerned with the Christening of his niece, and his affection for her. Public displays of personal affective bonds are rare, and this is reflected in the photographs where emotional attachment is only displayed between adults and children, or between children. The outward show of emotion between Christian and his little niece is obscured in his depiction of his girl-friend, although he uses the expression of another child (29) to reflect the unarticulated emotion he feels. The physical contact between friends and family (20, 21, 22) and the inclusion of young children in many of these 'dysfunctional' activities serves to reinforce the normality, the 'taken-for-granted' naturalness inherent in Christian's attitude as well as that of his subjects.

- > These narrated images are a conscious attempt to objectify the social environment that confronts a young single man in his daily life: he is implicitly identified with his subjects and yet his own role as an actor is necessarily backgrounded. His 'angle' on life in Okombahe is important because it confronts difficult social issues which have a common currency as Damara stereotypes, but which from his perspective are understandable as a



dilemma between 'nature' and morality, neither of which take precedence over the other. A year after these photos were made, /Igili had moved to Spitzkoppe where he was the leader of the local church choir. His run-in with the law over sheep theft, coupled with his resolve to avoid the temptation to drink and smoke dagga with his peers in Okombahe had led to this decision to move away from the village. He was living in his uncle's house and working part-time for the Spitzkoppe Community Tourist Project which paid him just enough to survive (N\$120 per month).



*Someday I will also have children*

When I first met **Linda Axakhoes**, she had only recently returned to her mother's house in one of the small settlements some 10 kilometres downstream from Okombahe. She had worked as a waitress in Windhoek for several years previously and finally decided to leave after being stabbed in the chest by her drunken boy-friend. Linda's mother had only lived here for five years, having divorced Linda's father some time previously and moved here from Hereroland with a local man, Linda's 'step father', John. He had recently built himself a separate house and the marital tension between John and Linda's mother was palpable.

Linda's first film records the circumstances of her mother and step-father's relationship and the presence of several of her sister's children. Her story about her favourite niece Poppy (7) reiterates the saga of her own parents' divorce, which is partially explicated in terms of their mixed Damara/Herero marriage. In spite of the fact that Linda herself uses her mother's Damara or her father's Herero surname by turns, she identifies her neighbour, Willemina Hoeses, as having "bushman blood" (6): "Even her husband Willem is the same, mixed up with Bushmen and Damaras - they

are not pure Damaras like us." When I asked her to explain the presence of her light complexioned niece Jennifer (1, 5), the irony of her professed Damara identity seemed lost on her as she evinced an evident pride in the fact that there is German blood on her mother's side, or that her own father is Herero.

The huddle of rooms which comprise the homestead and the immediate environment - the track which runs in front of the house; the river some one hundred metres further on, briefly in flood; and the new lush growth of ephemeral grasses and herbs which carpet the sandy ground beneath the mature, graceful Ana trees; all of these are effective markers for Linda's local world. She made several landscapes or 'pictures of nature', where her clearly expressed appreciation for the beauty of the veld during the short rainy season was typified by her excitement at seeing the Omaruru River in flood (9, 10). "It was so beautiful here at that time, during the rains. I wish that people who have never been here after the rains could see how beautiful it is - it is like paradise, though it passes very quickly."

By the time she made her second film, Linda's older sister and her sister's husband had also built a house here: he had been made redundant as a technician working for the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation in Windhoek and decided to retire to a communal area and farm. Both Linda's sister and her husband considered themselves to be 'Coloured', and their two teenage children spoke neither Damara or Herero, but Afrikaans and English. This example of Linda's family and her own confusing explication of ethnicity is not an unusual illustration of the highly fluid nature of Damara identity. At the same time, her family consider the cleaning of grass-seed as 'doing something cultural' (14); and specifically Damara.

Linda's hope to 'have children one day' (1) is brought closer with the arrival of Victus, her 'Damara' boy-friend who at the time was between jobs as a long-distance lorry driver. Portraits of her and Victus in the second film are suffused with some of the romance associated with the glamorous images in pop fashion magazines (15, 17, 18): "My hair is looking nice and we are wearing good clothes. I wanted a picture of me looking dressed up!". The camera angle and poses (Victus playing a stringless violin next to the flowers, Linda reclining on the earth in front of her house) are like talismans and implicitly magical: "they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality" (Sontag 1980: 16). Linda's situation was one of extreme

poverty and isolation, even after the arrival of her boy-friend Victus, who was often drunk. His intense jealousy made Linda's daily life like walking on glass, or on a knife edge, associated with the constant need to placate Victus's unpredictability and threats of violence.

A few months after these pictures were taken, Linda's step father was being treated for Tuberculosis in Omaruru, her brother Usiel was absent for extended periods after his older brother had committed suicide by drinking battery acid; her sister's husband had gone through most of his savings and could no longer afford to drive his bakkie back and forth to Okombahe, but spent more time drinking at home, or hiking to the nearest dorps in search of work. Linda was staying in Gobabis at the time of the exhibition opening, living alone in the township while her 'fiancee' Victus was on the road, working as a long distance driver again. She told me that she had no money, even for food, let alone a bus ride to Windhoek and although I sent her the fare, she didn't make it to the exhibition opening in Windhoek.



*Baaskap and balanced reciprocity*

**Ishmael †Kharichab** was one of my neighbours in Jansen. He was a hard working man of about my own age (mid-forties) who had returned to his family's place after having spent most of his adult life working as a labourer in Walvis Bay. To me, he remained a 'closed book', which at times was hard not to take personally, but I suspect that his disdain (or indifference) had its origins in the brutal *baaskap* of South African colonialism. Also, I couldn't really blame him for not wanting to take the time and effort to communicate with a 'dom' foreigner. We saw one another fairly frequently but only exchanged greetings and brief comments, usually as I passed his garden in the morning on my way to visit another neighbour in Jansen. My field notes record the responses of Ishmael and his uncle Augustinus to my offer of a camera:



Albert and I visited Augustinus who was still busy building a new donkey cart in his 'workshop' inside the deep shade of the massive Prosopis tree near his garden. He declined to take part in the photo project somewhat peremptorily because of his bad eye-sight and more significantly because 'I am not that sort of a man'. We stopped to speak with Ishmael and decided to elicit his interest in taking part. He refused to talk to me, even though he has some English, and continued to work in his garden as Albert told him everything about the photo project and the camera. He seemed keen to use a camera but refused to engage me, even avoiding any eye-contact: Albert thinks he is suspicious of whites, but I don't have the energy or the skill to tackle that one.

The next time I spoke at length with Ishmael was when I returned his photographs. His cousin, a teacher from Spitzkoppe helped to translate Ishmael's comments which I then transcribed for the exhibition. Both the images and the text seem characteristic of Ishmael's business-like manner. I knew very few of the people in his photos, and these only very casually, so I have little to add in the way of contextualisation. Images of everyday activities -washing, cooking, building and gardening - are suggestive of a sense of purpose which motivates the lives of Ishmael's family and neighbours. Many of his comments might be read as having political or moral spin: in contrast to popular discourse on Damara 'laziness', everyone in his photos is working; old people look for semi-precious stones "because they are hungry and need some way of making money: their pensions have not come for many months" (2); his elderly sister-in-law cooks the produce from her own garden (3,4); old Johnny is evidently very poor but is building himself a new house (7,8). The many photos of Ishmael's garden convey something about the pride and success which this new venture has brought to him and other families in the village of Jansen.

The story of this garden project is centred on the local politics which dogged the project during the year I lived here. Something of the complexity of local social relations can be gleaned from my own relationship with Ishmael. During the course of the so-called 'photo project', I had made a point of trying to communicate my reasons for, and interest in the Okombahe photos, although most of the photographers were unconcerned about this. Ishmael however was, and <sup>he</sup>knew instinctively what these photos might be worth to me. He started a rumour that I was prepared to pay each photographer to take part in the project. At that time, I did not know for

sure that an exhibition would take place, but later in the year I contacted all the photographers individually and explained that it would, and that free transport and accommodation would be provided for the photographers to attend the opening night in Windhoek. At the same time, I also explained that prints would be offered for sale, and that half the proceeds would accrue to the photographer, and the other half would form a fund which could be used for further community arts projects. Most people readily agreed that this was a fair arrangement. However, Ishmael's suspicions were aroused and he became convinced that I was taking a cut. Furthermore, he accused me of discriminating against him because I had only chosen one of his images to enlarge and frame. I explained that he had used only one roll of film whereas others had used two, and therefore provided me with choice, but this explanation did little to allay his suspicions.

This brief vignette of misunderstanding is indicative of the misapprehension inherent in the falsely relativised discourse associated with the development project which brought reliable irrigation to Jansen the year before. Again, the problem relates to imputed motivations associated with reciprocity and the political implications of 'dividing the spoils', as it were, of development aid. Ishmael was astute in his assessment of the value which the photo project represented to me, and in spite of the fact that I was not out for direct financial gain, he would not have been surprised to learn that the generous terms of my research grant made me very rich in comparison to him, and the symbolic value which the photo project would confer as part of my qualification for an academic degree would bring with it the ability to earn relatively fabulous amounts of money. Ishmael's abiding sense of this injustice became personalised and affected my own moral sense what constitutes a rough form of 'balanced reciprocity'. This disallowed the kind open financial reciprocity which Ishmael seemed to be demanding.

In the portrait of himself and his family (11), Ishmael can be seen concentrating on the instructions printed on the Fuji disposable camera packaging, as ever, looking into things, searching out the sub-text, teasing out some hidden political implication.



*A new daughter-in-law*

**Jacky Pietersen** came to stay with the Pietersen family in Jansen immediately after she married Ouma Ida's youngest son, Albertus. She arrived in Jansen, heavily pregnant and exceedingly shy, and stayed during the next two months until just before she gave birth and returned to her mother's home in Usakos. She and Albertus had been married during one of his brief, twice yearly shore visits from a deep-sea fishing boat working out of Walvis Bay and Cape Town. She came to stay in Jansen immediately after the wedding when Albertus returned to work; this was an opportunity for her and her in-laws to get to know each other, and while Ida looked after Jacky during the final stages of her pregnancy, she in turn could help look after Ida's young grandchildren.

This was a household dominated by three generations of women. Ida's husband had been bed-ridden after a car accident five years ago when she had become the effective household head. Now Ida, her older sister Maria, Ida's teenage daughter Lotte, Jacky, Oukely (Ida's hired helper) and three young granddaughters spent much of their time in the shady area near the cooking room or in the garden, talking, listening to the radio and entertaining the occasional neighbour who might drop by for a chat and a bucket of water. The domestic work was shared by all and consisted of looking after Ida's husband Johannes, pumping water from the nearly dry well twice a day, gardening, collecting firewood, looking after a few goats and chickens: Jacky's photos depict some of these daily chores - washing clothes, bathing children and irrigating the extensive fruit and vegetable garden.

Jacky was one of many people who came to stay with the Pietersen's during the year in which I stayed in Jansen. The constant coming and going of sons, daughters, grandchildren and in-laws from the extended Pietersen/Beukes family was augmented by a succession of labourers, most of whom stayed only for a month or two in order to get a small amount of



cash before moving on. The going rate of pay was less than \$100 a month (£15), supplemented with a diet of pap, vegetables and occasionally some stewed meat. Six out of the eleven households in Jansen employed such labourers, either as herders or as gardeners. Many of these were young men from Ovamboland, who unlike their Damara counterparts, have a reputation for reliability and thrift. Such characterisations of Ovambo identity by Damara farmers is ambiguous and contradictory: there is a general distrust of the Ovambo as a political force associated with the ruling SWAPO party. They are feared as the new colonialists, an alien culture creating new power structures which by-pass Damara interests and this residual fear is sometimes manifested in stories alleging the practice of witchcraft and murder on Damara employers by their Ovambo workers. Ovambos' reputation for diligence and hard work contrasts with Damaras' general denigration of their own character: "I don't know what is wrong with our people: the Damara are sick" is a common refrain of Damara employers. Drunkenness, theft and unreliability are stereotypical attributes of Damara farm labourers which bare a striking resemblance to the discourse surrounding the Ju'/hoan farm labourers of the Omaheke (see Suzman 1995:20). Such negative ascriptions are common among marginalised groups who occupy positions at the bottom of the social hierarchy throughout Namibia. The ambivalence associated with temporary social relationships between Damara employers and their hired workers finds its counterpart in the transitory settlement patterns of both individuals within families and of families as a whole. The bonds of affection which were made between Jacky and her in-laws during her visit to Jansen would serve to incorporate a new member into the highly mobile Pietersen family and consolidate a new generation within the family core, built on trust and reciprocity.

Shortly after Jacky completed her film, she returned to Usakos to deliver her baby and I was therefore unable to record her responses to the photos. Consequently, the captions which accompany her photographs are based on my own familiarity with the Pietersen homestead. I chose to include only a small selection of images which reflected her overall concern with typical domestic activities. The overwhelming predominance of females within this domestic space is not altogether untypical and I was struck by the similarities between Jacky's photographs and the results of my own attempts to record the Pietersen household on film.



*A realist's perspective: vegetables and tourmaline*

I was born near Okombahe, behind //Ganeb and lived there until I was four years old. Then my Grandfather came for me and took me to Walvis Bay where I grew up and went to school. When I finished I moved to Windhoek, went to work in Cape Town for a year and then returned to Windhoek. I came back to Okombahe a couple of years ago where I have been involved in the Rossing Garden Project.

Now I am trying to start another business buying tourmaline from local miners and selling it in Windhoek and Walvis Bay, trying to establish a market. At the moment there are problems because the buyers don't like the colour of the local tourmaline. I also plan to start marketing local fruit and vegetables. For example, presently dealers are buying carrots from South Africa for 80 cents or less per kilo and reselling them for 3 Rand in Namibia. The quality is often poor, and so we can easily compete. Many local gardeners are struggling because they don't have a local market. I will also try to sell Mateus's rugs in Windhoek when I go there once a week with vegetables and tourmaline.

In spite of the fact that **Ricky Locke** had a long family history in Okombahe (2) he was somewhat disconnected socially, because he did not speak Damara with any fluency due to the fact that he was taken away from his grandfather at the age of 4, and at the time probably resembled the boy who "looks a little bit scared"(1). The above transcription relates an enthusiasm and entrepreneurial optimism which was soon to be disappointed - he left Okombahe shortly after completing his second film to work in a video arcade in Windhoek.

Apart from the portraits of the little boy (1) and his grandmother (2), Ricky's photos depict a strata of Okombahe society associated with local



business men (10) and women (6 - 9), their children (4), their workers (3) and government employees (5). Many of the photographs are concerned with processes: the running of the garden project, connecting up irrigation systems in Jansen, the stages in textile manufacture (7 - 10); these accord with a 'realistic' view of image making, which defines knowledge as technical information. Although Ricky had been in Okombahe for over a year at the time, it was his first visit to Rebecca's and Mateus' rug weaving workshop at the Lutheran church. The workers in the Rossing Garden Project are 'his' workers and although his subjects appear to be comfortable with the relationship, Ricke's photos betray a distinctly different social position from that of other Okombahe photographers, one that might be interpreted in terms of class.



*Childhood landscapes*

**Maria Pietersen Abubakar** was one of my first friends in Okombahe and she helped me to meet other potential photographers and to distribute some of the cameras. She had the highest educational standards of all the photographers, spoke fluent English and during the year I knew her, made the transition from the rural poverty of her childhood into the emerging middle class through her marriage to a Nigerian secondary school science teacher. Her daughter Roxette, the issue of a previous relationship, was being brought up to speak English in an urban environment, although this was offset against her lengthy visits to Maria's mother, (Ouma Ida).

Maria's work is perhaps the most varied in terms of subject matter and technical approach. She was hesitant to talk about her photos preferring in many instances to 'let them speak for themselves'. Many of her pictures are made with an innate sense of composition in keeping with western aesthetic values (1,2, 11, 12, 13), and subject matter is strictly concerned with situations and events common to everyday living, whether at her mother's home outside of Okombahe or in the so-called 'old age home' of Blau Berg



where she lived after leaving school and before her marriage. Images of lighting fires, cooking, eating and cleaning are interspersed with the whimsical (12): "Even if you go there now, that cat will be lying like this with its leg hanging down".

Her second film was taken at her mother's house (in the same location as Jacky Pietersen's photographs) where she concentrated on the lives of her own and her sister's children. Many of these contain direct referents to her own childhood and reveal a personalised symbolism attached to specific aspects of the immediate environment (19-22). Landscapes hold a similarly connotative function which is expressed in her panoramic view of Jansen around the Pietersen homestead. It is one of only ten unpeopled landscape images to have been produced in the entire project.

This is the view of Jansen, our house is hidden in the trees. It hasn't changed at all since I was a little child. There was one tree around here, we used to call it Nasartjie, it was like a man who was chasing the kids, so every time we came there and were jumping on the tree it made a noise like 'grrrrrrrrrr', so we thought: 'that man will come out and frighten us'. It has rotted away now.

Another of Maria's landscapes depicts an island of large Ana trees in the centre of the river (19): "In the summer, this is where we were always having fun, there is a lot of shade and it's where we go to have our picnics and Christmas and things like that". A series of five more, nearly abstract images, of trees and shrubs are related to the sweet and sour taste of their berries, their use in building houses, the process of desiccation by termites and their place in childhood play "... we used to collect the leaves from this tree to use as cups in our dolls houses..." (21). These pictures and the landscape they represent, mediate the cultural and the natural, a medium of exchange between the human world and the world of nature (Mitchell 1994: 5-34). For Maria they provoke memories of childhood, tastes and smells, fears and pleasures associated with the raw material of play; they become ciphers for the moral and ideological ambiguity inherent in the process of a child's inclusion in a network of social and cultural codes.

This theme is elaborated in several photos of Roxette and her cousins; they are depicted playing with dolls, standing in ridiculous poses, or helping with simple household chores. This conflation of Maria's childhood memories with that of her own daughter betrays a deep attachment to place,

a sense of personal identity and continuity associated with her childhood home and its 'unchanging' landscape.

Through my friendship with Maria, I was able to observe and experience many of the anomalies which colour the contemporary culture in Okombahe in ways which might be said to illustrate rapid change and 'social transformation'. Maria's sudden marriage to David Abubakar is a case in point. After many months of uncertainty stemming from several deferred plans for engagement parties, Maria and David arrived back in Jansen after a weekend in Walvis Bay to announce that they were now married. Rather than conform to convention and hold a large 'traditional' wedding lasting several days, with all the attendant entertainment and expense, the Abubakars had decided on a quick civil wedding. Maria was married in a new black dress because it could double as a party dress for other occasions and immediately after the ceremony they put a down payment on a new white bakkie. As a symbol of her upward mobility, independence and her partnership with David, it could hardly have been matched by the most glamorous of wedding gowns. While their pragmatism might easily be interpreted as a response to economic change and class formation, it might also be seen in reference to changing marriage practices and institutional appropriation which have characterised Damara responsiveness to social and economic circumstances throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries (Fuller 1993:121-131).

The institution of the church plays a critical role in the cultural lives of many Damara, and Maria's decision to marry outside the church seemed to have had nothing to do with her lack of Christian faith, or participation in the church itself. In spite of being brought up a Catholic, she sometimes attended the Lutheran church, although most Sundays she met with the much smaller Catholic congregation. As a way of introducing me to the social life of Okombahe, she took me to a Lutheran choir meeting soon after I moved to Jansen. About twenty choirs from all over southern Namibia had gathered to raise funds for the church. Local people were charged a small admission fee and the event took the form of a kind of game show/ lottery. A church elder officiated by collecting bids from the audience who 'bought' the right to decide on which choirs or individuals were to sing. During the course of the performance anyone was then free to stop the proceedings in mid-song by nominating another hymn, or a completely different set of singers. This interruption could be outbid by someone else who had some

other preference and the elder ran up and down the isles waving money and directing the wishes of the latest and highest bidder. The whole event seemed to embody a chaotic parody of the capitalist system, within the framework of a church charity, its spectacle a radical contrast to the sedate Protestant churches of northern Europe.

I also attended a Catholic service with Maria and Ouma Lucia one Sunday and found myself sitting on the wrong side of the church which was segregated down the middle into male and female domains. My embarrassment at this *faux pas* was made even worse when during collection when I was obliged to join the queue of women and put my contribution into their pot in front of the altar. I felt somewhat irritated with Maria for not forewarning me of this gender divide but later she told me that she was glad this had happened because during the next week's service the amount of money collected would be announced and my contribution would help the women to 'beat' the men. In any case, she assured me that this division between men and women was not strictly adhered to and she made me feel as if my embarrassment was superfluous.

If I were to 'position' Maria within the social matrix of the 'new' Namibia, I would be tempted to see her in the forefront of her generation, an intelligent, courageous woman, at times recklessly desperate to escape the narrow confines of poverty and communal segregation, at others, almost laconic, able to take everything in her stride. Within the context of the 1990s, she is replicating the determination of women in previous generations, including her mother, to secure better opportunities and more security for their children than they themselves experienced. Historians have often used the trope of 'transformation' to describe the social and economic upheaval which accompanied the establishment of Okombahe as a Damara settlement.<sup>9</sup> And yet many individuals, (of whom Maria is an arbitrary though apt example), characterise a form of on-going transformation which begs the question of Damara identity itself. What remains consistently 'Damara' across generations and through time? How is this 'something', commonly recognised as pertaining to a Damara identity, transmitted? How indeed, if not through women like Maria, whose ability to adapt, incorporate and appropriate relevant strategies gleaned from the world and times in which they are living, bestows a continually renewed sense Damara

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<sup>9</sup> The historiographic issue of social 'transformation' is discussed at length in chapters 4, 5 & 6.



identity? There can be no doubt that this collective conceit is associated with the deep affective bonds between parents and children, especially between mothers and daughters, but it is also rooted in a sense of place, albeit a place characterised by the transient, the temporary, and all the perverse regressions perpetrated by colonial bigotry and greed, but also a place of childhood memories, a place which changes more slowly than other parts of the late twentieth century world, a place characterised in Maria's memory in countless personal stories (15):

Roxette. Once she came to these pepper [chilli] plants and bit one and while it was burning her mouth she spoke her first word. "What happened?" we said, and she cried "pepper! pepper". But still she cannot stop going to this pepper tree.

## Conclusion

I trust the reader will forgive the length of this chapter, although I'm not sure how to excuse my inability to do justice to the men and women whom I have been describing. This chapter might easily have formed the basis of an entire thesis devoted to the photographs and the people who made them. Any one individual, indeed, a place, an event or even the recollection of a single day might have been sufficient to draw all the ethnographic detail out of my experience, provided I was a skilled enough writer. My intention, as I have already said, was to explore the meaning of the photographs at several levels by engaging the imagination and acknowledging the distortions of desire which affect the gaze of all viewers. No doubt, the individuals involved would have told very different stories about themselves, and about me.

The primary purpose of this chapter then, has been to elaborate on the visual imagery and self-representations of the photography exhibition. This multi-layered narrative, if read in conjunction with the photos, where the text is an adjunct to the visual presentation, rather than the other way around, might just engage that 'other side of the brain' and take the reader closer to the syncretic, spatial and perceptual experience of 'being there'. The photos themselves act as a counter balance to my verbal and analytical discourse which seeks to contextualize, normalise and compare that which is ultimately incommensurate, mysterious and incomparable. Perhaps someone else will take this process to its logical conclusion in a full-blown

treatment of visual self-representation as an ethnographic genre. The ultimate goal of this thesis however, is otherwise, though this brief ethnographic exposure serves as a necessary prerequisite to reaching that goal. What I hope to have achieved, is the beginnings of a holistic sense of what it means to live in Okombahe and how this is contingent and contested. It would be possible to draw out any number of themes and related debates about identity, place, culture, history and representation based on the montage created by the Okombahe photographers.

Briefly, these first two chapters contextualize the scene of my fieldwork, without which my subsequent discussion on the reproduction of pastoral practice, property relations and their attendant social networks would be incomplete and perhaps incomprehensible. The following chapter takes the subject of the photography exhibition one step further away from its creators into the realm of political discourse, and specifically into contemporary expressions of ethnic identity and ethnic historiography, in other words, into the murky waters of agency and ideology. Chapter 2 has laid the ground work for this: if I have not yet succeeded in conveying the polyvalency of multiple and competing discourses which exist in Okombahe between young and old, between the educated and uneducated, between classes and ethnic groups, in the dichotomy of rural and urban, of traditional and modern, conservative and 'progressive', then hopefully the next chapter will bring us closer to this end.

### CHAPTER 3

## THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Let us begin by accepting the notion that although there is an irreducible subjective core to human experience, this experience is also historical and secular, it is accessible to analysis and interpretation and - centrally important - it is not exhausted by totalizing theories, not marked and limited by doctrinal or national lines, not confined once and for all to analytical constructs.

Edward Said in *Culture and imperialism* (1993:35)

I initially conceived of self-representation through photography as a research methodology which at the same time gave the people of Okombahe a voice, unmediated by the political influence of outsiders. It was hoped that this process might reveal some of the visual and narrative codes which surround issues of representation, identity, and the social relations. I was less concerned with delineating Okombahe's social relations and material culture (of poverty) "through the basic methodology of counting, evaluating and comparing the treasure of photographic data" (Collier 1967: 104), and still less with such positivist projects as Collier's "study of the mental health and adjustment of native Americans relocated into cities" (1979:280).<sup>1</sup> As outlined in Chapter 1, the analysis of personal perceptions and the mediation of cultural norms through the visual suggest ways in which to understand the ocular unconscious, the 'second nature' underscoring the common sense of every day life in Okombahe. But this 'second nature' can only 'make sense' in the context of a theory of the individual as existing within a number of contradictory positions and subjectivities.

What holds these multiple subjectivities together so that they constitute agents in the world are such things as the subjective experience of identity, the physical fact of being an embodied subject, and the historical continuity of the subject which means that the past subject positions tend to overdetermine present subject positions (Moore 1994:140).

In the local politics of Okombahe, where the co-existence of multiple subjectivities are expressed as competing discourses, these subject positions

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<sup>1</sup> The use of ethnographic photography as a means of studying material culture and cultural change is discussed in relation to Collier and others in Chapter 1.



become hierarchically ordered, not only as overdetermining structures of a conceptual or metaphorical nature, used and 'taken for granted' in every day life, but also in the more overtly political discourses which put these same metaphors to use as an *indirect* way of getting at issues of meaningful existence (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:236).

By examining these political discourses it is possible to locate the 'intractable reality' which constitutes local knowledge and common practice in relation to the dynamics of poverty, strategies of survival and concepts of property and place through the sedimentation of micropractices into macroprocesses. Many of these issues have been illuminated in the personal images and stories of the photographers. The previous chapter set out to elaborate on some of the themes which individual photographers evoked; short biographies and some reference to my personal relationships with the photographers and their families were intended to convey something of the multiple subjectivities which exist in and between individuals. When this is abstracted to a level of rhetoric, as in either academic or political discourse, it is possible to understand something about the local effects of regional, national and global influences which form part of a larger overdetermined historical continuity.

This chapter examines the speeches of two Damara politicians, both of which raise issues of identity and representation in different ways. Each have their reflection and counterpart in ongoing, political and academic discourses which locate Damara 'ethnicity' and 'tribalism' somewhere between a primordial condition and the accumulation of neglected 'traditional' practices. It is a discourse which describes a collective fall from grace, the loss of self-esteem and the evasiveness of power while propounding a revival of Damara pride based on concepts of aboriginality, Christian moral precepts and a historical sense of political injustice. Damara identity, is shown to be diverse and polyphonous. The premise of a 'collective life', the unification of a Damara people, can be seen to arise from disparate discourses fused into a consistent ideological structure based on the practices of individuals in their everyday life feeding into the creation of wider social movements. The colonial predilection of transforming an African past "into the timeless sign of the 'traditional'" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:33) has been adapted by contemporary Damara leaders in order to similarly characterise and historicize a complex Damara collectivity in relationship with other collectivities. "For it is the gradual articulation of

such alien worlds that local and universal realities come to define each other - and that markers like 'ethnicity' and 'culture', 'regionalism' and 'nationalism' take on their meaning" (ibid.:33).

### **Poverty, Art and Culture**

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Theo-Ben Gurirab opened the Okombahe photo exhibition in the National Art Gallery of Namibia to an assembly of perhaps two hundred people including ten of the photographers from Okombahe. He was (and remains) a leading and influential politician in the SWAPO government; a Damara speaker who spent some of his youth in the Okombahe area before going into exile in the early 1970s: his perspective is one of an informed but distanced 'insider'. He spoke to a mainly white audience in English, punctuated by asides in Damara to the otherwise mostly uncomprehending photographers.

The transformation of the photographs from snap-shots to art exhibition elicited a critical/political response from Theo-Ben Gurirab, where the intractable reality of both the images and what they signify became distanced and more focused in political and cultural discourse. Three basic themes were intermingled in the Foreign Minister's address: the function of art, the relationship between identity and tradition, and the politics of development. A patrician moral tone underscored all of these concerns and he seemed unable or unwilling to identify with the powerful images confronting him on the walls of the gallery.

He sought first of all to separate the social issues portrayed in the photographs from the exhibition's aesthetic merits by disclaiming the critical function of art, although he commented that art "connects the present with the past" and "reminds a people about their roots" and "helps objectify their aspirations or problems".

Their heritage and social values are kept alive through art giving hope and confidence in preparing the future. You can see the evidence of this in our rock paintings or in museums and libraries of many countries in the world." [But not, presumably, in the photographs of Okombahe.] "...there is no good or bad art. By the same token there is no good or bad language. I am not here talking about the difference between poetry and graffiti. What I mean is that both language and art are a means of communication. As such, they are value-neutral.

Having made this connection between language and art, it is then hard to understand what he means by heritage and social value if the medium of their communication (through language and art) is value-neutral - as a politician he must surely know they are not. Is this meant to be an oblique reference to what Saussure called 'the arbitrariness of the sign' (Saussure 1959) or its opposite, the impossible notion that we are living in a world whose signs are indeed 'natural' (Taussig 1993: xviii)? He then turns his attention to the marginal status of the Damara language within Namibia today and remarks on the fact that many places, once named by Damaras, are now commonly known by their German, Afrikaans or Herero equivalents (Okombahe is a Herero name). In the light of what he goes on to argue, it seems that Theo-Ben Gurirab is discussing the transmission of power and its associated legitimating discourse, which actually defines what we normatively categorise as poetry or graffiti. The graffiti and/or poetry of place names, scrawled and inscribed across the Namibian landscape is openly contested:

My link to /Â ǀGomhes - which I suppose, is called Okombahe because of the intimidation of the clicks - is this: I was born in !Usa !Khos (Usakos) but my afterbirth is by custom interned at /Ui-Kerens. /Ui-Kerens is a village located at the northwestern frame of !Oe ǀGâb (Erongo mountain) about 10 kilometres south-west<sup>2</sup> of /Â ǀGomhes.

His emphasis on language is anything but "value-neutral". At the same time however, he locates this conflation of names and language within the colonial experience of his childhood where Usakos "was transformed by internal migrations and inter-marriages into a multi-ethnic and harmonious community of black people, transcending tribalism and regionalism. It was our human fortress of solidarity against apartheid and brutal white *baasskap*". This direct reference to colonial politics and their impact on inter-ethnic relations can also be interpreted as an indirect statement about the wavering policy of reconciliation which was prominent in the news at the time of his address. The complex debate around the status and legitimacy of Damara identity within Namibia today is touched on here. But underlying this discourse is an assertion common to both pre-colonial and post independence inter-ethnic relationships insofar as Damara identity has

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<sup>2</sup> It is actually south-east of Okombahe.



always been and remains highly fluid: this in itself remains a defining trait of the Damara.

Astonishingly, his claim to "Damara Royalty" and through it his connection to Okombahe as the burial place of its kings, opens a discourse on tradition and hegemony which could be seen as paradoxical and ironic were it not for the utter seriousness with which it is stated. ".../Â ‡Gomhes used to be and is still today a revered place of Damara pilgrimage for political, religious and cultural reasons." He does not state that these reasons are based on the fact that Okombahe was settled by refugees, that their first 'king' was appointed by the Germans and that thereafter this designation was dependent on various colonial agencies conferring a modicum of authority over a crowded labour reserve. Today, the Damara leadership constitutes an ineffectual opposition to SWAPO political power and retains little of the popularity and support evident during the pre-independence struggle. While the present 'king' continues to command respect, his ineffectiveness makes him little more than an icon of missed opportunities, a symbol of dwindling political power associated with the official posturing to do with the a 'tribal identity' during the homeland era.

Gurirab's statements concerning 'royalty' can only be seen in relation to the tribal undercurrents within SWAPO's dominant support base in Ovambo. His claims to a Damara aristocracy and the implied political status of a 'Damara tribal tradition' might be seen as a shallow repetition of a thoroughly discredited colonial discourse surrounding 'tribal leadership'. Today in Namibia, the theme of 'tribal authority' is a recurring source of political manoeuvring, especially between the most powerful ethnic groupings (Ovambo and Herero) as a means of countering the overwhelming centralisation of power by SWAPO (Leys & Saul 1995:196-203). It seems ironic that having just made a plea for the transcendence of tribalism he now legitimates his own position within such a tribal power structure calling on the convergence of geography and his clan history - "My clan comprising the Gurirabs and other kindred families is called !Oe ‡Gân after !Oe ‡Gâb (Erongo Mountain)" - it is here that "my afterbirth is by custom interned [sic]".<sup>3</sup> This blatant contradiction between SWAPO's 'nation building' effort on the one hand, and its popularist identification with tribal structures at a local level on the other, is symptomatic of the dominance of

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<sup>3</sup> This custom has almost completely died out, partly because many women now deliver their children in hospitals.

SWAPO. Its party bosses have successfully constructed a *de facto* 'no party state' by appropriating the strategies of the opposition within its own programme.

Theo-Ben compounds his own contradictions when he describes the course of tradition and its manifestation in contemporary Okombahe through a political and socio-economic history which compares the Okombahe of his youth to that of today. He is clearly troubled by his present knowledge of Okombahe and its portrayal in the photographs:

Sadly, /Â ‡Gomhes is today a community which is sleeping through many exciting things that are taking place in Namibia: it is being by-passed by opportunities and benefits of independence. Most of its inhabitants appear to have been struck by a numbing amnesia.

He accounts for the "process of disintegration" in Okombahe's social and cultural life first of all by blaming the colonial policy which created the expanded 'ethnic homelands' during the late 1960s and sustained the Bantustan administration through to the late 1980s. This "sapped the place and no less the residents of livelihood and initiative, leaving behind a wasteland of broken hearts and deferred dreams". Secondly, urban migration accounts for the absence of a flourishing economy "'leaving the future of a once thriving community in the hands of a vanishing group of old people" who are now impoverished because of "nature, cattle thieves and various other midnight robbers". Finally, the upstream damming of the Omaruru River by white commercial farmers is held responsible for the demise of the area's 'lifeline'.

During the heyday of this enlarged community, of many fond memories for my generation [sic], the people were self-sufficient in food, livestock of all kinds and could even boast of impressive financial savings. All this is now gone. The community itself has dwindled. A few individuals and families are, nevertheless, keeping hope alive. This is the message of the photographs. . . the exhibition we are viewing depicts mere relics of what was once a self-sustaining community of proud people with outstanding achievements as farmers, businessmen, administrators, builders and educators.

Gurirab's analysis of change is a critique of colonialism and the direct effects of grand apartheid, migrant labour and the control of water by white farmers; all subjects which I will address in detail in the following chapters.

Without referring to it by name, he blames the mentality of 'dependency' as it was fostered by colonial policies for the moral decay, lack of initiative and loss of economic opportunities which he sees in the Okombahe of the present. I will argue that this is at best only a partial truth and that for many Damara speakers in Okombahe, the creation of Damaraland represented an opportunity to escape the confines of a tiny labour reserve and to exercise greater political control over their own affairs. Urban migration was only kept in check by repressive pass laws and when they were repealed in 1976, this phenomenon took on patterns similar to situations common throughout the developing world; there is little evidence to support claims that the demography of Okombahe is skewed as a result of this. The proportion of productive adults living in Okombahe is presently higher than the national average; the discrepancy in the proportion of men and women in this age group is only marginally higher than average indicating that male migration is relatively small.<sup>4</sup> The village has rapidly become a mini-urban centre as families move here from surrounding settlements and more remote rural areas. Far from dwindling, the 'community' has grown several-fold since the 1960s.

The increasing frequency of stock theft (and 'various other midnight robbers') is a consequence of deepening poverty, worsening unemployment, and a general break-down in law and order. This might be explained as a symptom of the democratisation process after a century of repression (as in South Africa during the 1990s) but its opposite, the removal of locally based 'traditional' authority and the continual centralisation of state power must also have contributed to this trend.

The damming of rivers and the extraction of ground water for urban and commercial populations has undoubtedly contributed to falls in the water table and decreased flooding during the rainy season but other factors complicate this equation. Nearly 20 years of below average rainfall in Damaraland, and a poorly implemented national water policy are also to blame for reduced flooding. Severe droughts during the 1980s and early 1990s decimated cattle numbers throughout the region but Okombahe was one of the hardest hit areas. Many livestock farmers have since moved their

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<sup>4</sup> The national ratio of women to men is 52 percent to 48 percent in the 15 to 65 age group ; in Okombahe the ratio is 56 percent to 44 percent indicating that at least 8 percent of men in this age group are elsewhere. Many of them are looking after livestock outside of Okombahe while the mothers of their children stay in the village. See Chapter 6 for a more detailed analysis of Okombahe's demography.



remaining herds to higher rainfall areas in Damaraland and away from rural population centres, improving their chances of surviving drought and at the same time diminishing the threat of stock theft. Others have simply given up.

The change which Theo-Ben Gurirab confronts in the images of Okombahe is in many ways an uncomfortable one. But as a Minister and leading politician during six years of independence he bears a certain responsibility for the present social and economic situation facing the photographers and their families, which he is unable to face up to. /Â  
‡Gomhes is a microcosm of change typical of many communities in Namibia, its recent history a symptom of colonialism, economic modernisation and unequal rights over the natural resources from which most of Namibia's wealth has been produced. But his analysis of Okombahe's 'demise' is worrying when he conflates this with Kolmanskop<sup>5</sup> and Pompeii ("I am reminded of two other places which suffered varying degrees of devastation. . .")! The grand sweep of history ("Renaissance followed the Dark Ages in Europe the same way sunrise always follows midnight") and his appeal to "good Samaritans everywhere, to protect and help preserve our national heritage and universal cultural patrimony" (as embodied in the country's rock paintings), are evasions of the issues raised by the photographs of Okombahe. He invokes 'progress' and calls on all of us "to be ready to give a helping hand", commenting finally that *"Such humanitarian gestures should, however, beware not to confuse poverty with art or culture"*.

This final admonition goes to the heart of current debates in Namibia more commonly associated with 'exoticized' groups such as the Bushmen and Himba. It is a reaction against the reifying tendencies of past ethnographic representations which isolated cultural attributes from their political and historical contexts. All Namibians were subjected to this in varying forms during the colonial period. As the colonial period began, Damara status was characterised through names given to them by their more powerful and well organised neighbours, such as "Chou Dama" (dirty or shit people) and "Ovazorotua" (black barbarians), providing Europeans with a justification for the presence of missionaries and for colonialism in

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<sup>5</sup> Kolmanskop was a flourishing diamond mine on the Namib coast around the turn of the century. It is now derelict and inundated with sand dunes, a magnet for tourists and a bizarre set for media production companies making advertisements of commodities ranging from French cheese to Japanese cars.

general. Unlike the Himba and Ju/'hoan, who have more recently become symbols which contrast with modern man's spiritual loss and alienation from nature, the Damara have been described in terms of dispossession, servitude and transition since the advent of merchant capital into the country during the 19th century and continue to labour under such negative ascriptions. Their enforced poverty, lack of hierarchical structure, their close association with the forces of colonialism as passive subjects and ready converts to Christianity, has stripped them of any possible vestige of imputed 'exoticism' and conspired to perpetuate an imposed identity aligned to evolving definitions of lower caste and under class.<sup>6</sup>

Put in its simplest form, the debate to which Theo-Ben Gurirab's concluding statement refers, centres on the opposition between cultural ecology/functionalist representations of rural societies (Kent & Vierich 1989; Hitchcock & Ebert 1989; Lee 1979) against a Marxist analysis of relations of production and class formation (Gordon 1992; Denbow & Wilmsen 1986; Wilmsen 1989). Gurirab's admonition "not to confuse poverty with art or culture" is the latest manifestation of this generic discourse; as if his urban audience is in danger of falling for this conflation of poverty with the exotic! Were it not for the tremendous impact which such discourses have had on Namibians through the imposition of colonial politics, Gurirab's concluding remarks would be hard to understand. Today in Namibia, such debates continue to produce repercussions at many levels. The continuity of hegemony related to discourses which frame ethnic identity have been documented in the cases of marginalised groups such as the Hai//om (Widlok 1994) and the farm Bushmen of the Omaheke (Suzman 1995). Contemporary government policy can hardly escape a legacy of contradictions and anomalies, enshrined in colonial legislation, which owes its origins to colonial conceptions of ethnic identity. The issue of land rights in former Bushmanland is a case-book example of the perpetuation of injustice based on reified ethnic identities frozen into political anomalies (Botelle & Rohde 1995); and this is further reflected in the government's deliberations regarding communal land reform in former Damaraland (Republic of Namibia 1992; 1993; 1996; Rohde 1994). Many assumptions concerning the social and economic basis of environmental policy is

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<sup>6</sup> Suzman (1995) describes the 'farm Bushmen' of the Omaheke in much the same terms. In contrast to their Ju/wasi neighbours in the north of the Otjozondjupa Region, the so-called 'acculturated' farm Bushmen have many attributes in common with those described in early colonial discourse which ascribed a marginal identity to the Damara.

informed by discourse derived from such ethnic reification: allegations of overgrazing, 'the tragedy of the commons', the improper use of groundwater are commonly made in the absence of substantive research on the basis of the received wisdom of white settler conceptions. And professionals in Namibia, working in such disciplines as archaeology and history are riven by factions contesting an attenuated form of such colonial discourse (e.g. Kinahan 1992).

Perhaps it is unfair to analyse the Foreign Minister's opening remarks as if they were part of a serious intellectual disquisition; they were after all, part of a ceremonial event. And yet his speech touches on some of the most significant elements in discourses on Damara identity, tradition and social 'structure'. In both popular and academic constructions of social identity the Damara represent the exact opposite of a self-contained, self-sufficient culture. The symptoms of 'degeneration' to which Theo-Ben Gurirab implicitly refers, (alcohol abuse, theft, unemployment, begging) are depicted in the photographs of Okombahe, but rather than serving as a critique of Damara social life, the photographs place these 'symptoms' within a thoroughly localised system of shared meanings. External influences are naturalised and incorporated into the personal lives of the photographers - distinctions between the traditional and the modern are blurred: Okombahe is fully a part of the contemporary world rather than a degenerate relic of an authentic and vibrant cultural past. This negative comparison between the present and a remembered or imagined past is a defining characteristic of representations of the Damara throughout their history. The political-economy behind this history of representation is a crucial counterpoint to the interpretation of the cultural subjectivity which the photographs mediate. Thus, Theo-Ben Gurirab's opening speech introduces several themes which will be developed throughout the remainder of this thesis.

I can only speculate on what the photographers themselves made of this speech. Old Johannes (Tekla #2) sat immediately in front of the podium in a central clearing of the standing crowd, where he looked quizzically up at the Foreign Minister; he had agreed to represent his wife and daughter on condition that he had a clean shirt to wear. (Tekla hid on the day the photographers were driven to Windhoek because she did not have any shoes and Lucia felt it was more important to attend a meeting regarding Jansen's communal water point from which she had been denied access). Johannes's bad hip had become even worse during the journey to Windhoek



so that now he reclined, rather than sat, uncomfortably on a chair clutching his walking stick, incongruous but unfazed. Christolene and Christine both held their recently born babies, smothered in brightly patterned blankets as if they might contract a fatal illness in the faintly cool air of the gallery interior. Maria was stunning in her Nigerian dress; Ishmael, Albert and Bernardo were all cool and casual behind dark glasses. Willem and Willemina looked like a prosperous middle class couple - it was hard to imagine that they had left their remote farm by donkey cart only the day before to meet me in Okombahe. Later, when I questioned the photographers about their impressions of the Foreign Ministers opening remarks, they expressed their disappointment and regret: "I guess he doesn't like the people from Okombahe very much" or "What does he know? He's been away for most of his life and now he's separated from his people". They felt betrayed by his ungenerous response to the openness of their work and the 'intractable reality' of their lives.

## **The World of Man**

I had been living in the small farming community of Jansen, outside of Okombahe village for several months when I was given the gift of a book by Oxxkely, my young friend and sometimes Damara teacher. Oxxkely was illiterate but like many of my neighbours, most of whom could read some Afrikaans, his thirst for picture magazines and newspapers seemed unquenchable. The equivalent of 'Good Housekeeping', 'Woman's Own', 'True Romance', old mail-order clothing catalogues and weekly newspapers were exchanged and hoarded, becoming dog-eared and torn, until eventually they were abandoned to the depredations of children or eaten by goats. People would sometimes drop by or shout in passing, asking if I had anything they could read, even old newspapers were useful in whiling away the afternoon hours during the fierce heat when many people either napped or sat in the shade against the outside walls of their oven-like huts or under make shift awnings.

Having grown up in Omaruru Oxxkely left home at the age of twelve and took a 'job' working with a tin miner on the edge of the Namib where he gathered fire-wood, carried water and cleaned camp in return for his food and keep. He was strong and well built for his age, cheerful and good-natured, but 'dom', slow - he dropped out of school after repeatedly failing

at the lowest grades and could neither read nor write, his credulity and trusting nature making him prey to a variety of unscrupulous cheats and tricksters. His real mother had turned him out of her house because she could not cope with a retarded child, her first born, a 'mistake' common to teenage girls in Namibia. Oxxkely never knew his father although he was told that a certain rangy guitar player who toured with a Damara pop band was the man. In the circumstances he had no alternative but to attach himself to any kindly adult who would take him on as a 'son' and child labourer.

Oxxkely was brought to Okombahe by Maria Pietersen, who needed someone to look after her house in Blau Berg, the compound built by the Bantu administration for the old and disabled, but which was now increasingly occupied by the descendants, relatives or friends of these original inhabitants<sup>7</sup>. Ostensibly these houses belonged to the government, but in the absence of any clear administrative control the right of occupancy was determined by community consent, the headman's decision, or informal rights of succession. Since Maria was dividing her life between Blau Berg, her fiancée's government house at the secondary school and her parent's home in Jansen, she wanted Oxxkely to look after her possessions in Blau Berg (in case of theft) as well as to maintain a symbolic presence there in case her occupancy rights were questioned. Maria's younger sister Lotte had fulfilled this role until recently, as well as taking on the role of mother to Maria's two year old daughter. This arrangement had come to an end when tension between Lotte and a neighbour in Blau Berg reached a violent climax - he had deliberately run into Lotte with his bakkie late one night as she returned to Maria's house, from a party. Lotte (who was only 17 at the time) went back to her parent's home in Jansen after being released from hospital in Omaruru and filed a court case against her next-door neighbour in Blau Berg.<sup>8</sup> Oxxkely became her temporary replacement. Two months later Maria and her fiancée were married, making it possible for her to live officially with her husband in accommodation provided to teachers and their families

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<sup>7</sup> Out of 48 dwellings, only 14 were occupied by the elderly; 28 were inhabited by young families or single men and women, 6 were empty.

<sup>8</sup> Almost a year after this incident, Lotte and her mother travelled to Uis for the trial hearing by a magistrate from Walvis Bay. By this time Lotte had turned eighteen and was no longer a minor needing the representation of a parent. Before her case was opened, she was ushered into the magistrates office where she was requested to drop her case by the magistrate and the defence council. Frightened and unsure of herself, she agreed.

at the secondary school; the tenancy in Blau Berg was passed on to her friend Christine Maletsky.

Oxkely actually referred to Maria as his 'mother', and when she moved away from Okombahe with her new husband, Oxkely was 'given' to Maria's mother and went to live in Jansen, becoming a part of the Pietersen household as a working 'son'. During the short space of six months he went from being a mistrusted stranger to a family member and then abruptly left.

The book Oxkely gave me was unusual in being a large hard-back with many colour illustrations and photographs. It was called *The World of Man, Volume 2/ Europe (France through Ireland)*, published in 1969 by Creative World Publications, Inc. in Chicago. Here was a popular ethnography of the tribes of Europe, adapted from an earlier edition of Museo dell 'Uomo in co-operation with the Musee de l'Homme. I had previously told Oxkely stories about my home in Scotland, trying to describe it in terms of its similarities and differences to Namibia, but now he had an authoritative source of illustrations to which he eagerly turned expressing consternation, surprise and seeking my explanations of strange images of bizarre nineteenth century national costumes or a 'primitive' Hungarian festive mask. Apart from the puzzle of bag-pipe players decked out in the effete Victorian parody of highland dress ('The fighting Highlander of olden times were toughened warriors, little interested in the peaceful arts...') and the tossing of the caber ("an outstanding event at the Highland games") the illustrations of Scotland seemed rather pedestrian and familiar: peasant women with creels on their backs, hearths with the iron pots (poitjies) so much a feature of contemporary Namibian life, querns or grinding stones for cereal, potato fields, a green but barren landscape.

Each nation was described through short sections featuring population, principal cities, government and history, followed by brief essays on national traits and 'folklore' with headings such as "The Rain Fairy", "Is There a German Soul", "The Forest as Temple", "The Life Cycle", "The Dead Man's Shoes"... The Scots are accorded a separate section within Great Britain and are described as having 'always been proud of their glorious past and their popular traditions'.

The Scot is both tougher and sadder than the Englishman. He is more devoted to detail, slower to make decisions, and on the whole, more philosophical. Although there is a great deal of humour in him, he does not make jokes readily. Physically robust and meticulous in



character, he is also a refined craftsman, a faithful executor of orders, a diligent citizen, and one of the world's best foot soldiers. One of the finest, in fact, of all human types. . .

Oxkely knew that I was intending to write about the Damara people: the latent irony of giving me this naive 'volkskunte' ethnography written by and about European people cut several ways at once! Here was a perfect example of the complex workings of the mimetic faculty: the reifying tendencies of ethnography in the age of colonialism had come home to roost in the othering of European 'natives' albeit in a highly romanticised, anodyne form. It bears all the hall-marks of Namibian ethnographies carried out under the colonial regime and used to justify policies of subjugation and exploitation:

Being used to subservience the Berg Damara is happiest under a firm hand, which rules his daily conduct and nips sudden desires for insubordination and impertinence in the bud. The art and liberty of brewing a strong intoxicating beer from sugar, meal and other ingredients he misuses to his own detriment and ruins his health thereby, does not achieve possessions, becomes a disgrace to his community and only carries out his duties under protest. In the background wait the augur of the witch doctor, the bearers of his old, almost forgotten, religion and instead of gratefully enjoying and applying the freedom which modern times have brought him, he frequently and of his own accord reverts to subservience to his lusts and passions... (Vedder 1966 [1928]:77).

These negative images might just as easily have been used to describe Scottish Highlanders before they became the objects of romantic nostalgia. Given a more benevolent and generous disposition, Henrich Vedder's Damara ethnography could have been used as a model text for 'The World of Man'; and here was a Damara lad eager to share this work of scholarly knowledge with me, about 'my own people'! So much of what I was surrounded by in Okombahe seemed to be reflected in these images of European peasantry. Because of its studied denial of all signs of modernisation in 1960s Europe (not one reference is made about the existence of motor ways, housing estates, industry and the mass media), 'The World of Man' achieves an 'othering' of Europeans as objectified cultural entities in a similar vein to Vedder. Oxkely's gift was a token of the depth of interpenetration between European colonialism and indigenous Namibians:

how could I begin to explain the complexity of this without in some way referring back to my own model European world of man?

Inevitably, every ethnography must remain partial - an approximation of the multiple and complex inter-relationships between people. Ethnographic representation necessarily spans the narrative distance between individual testimony and political discourse, between personal history and its contextualisation within ideology. When Theo-Ben Gurirab warns us 'not to confuse poverty with art or culture' he is severing this connection between personal experience and collective representation. Even without a clear definition of what he means by the words poverty, art and culture, I don't see how it is possible to separate them, unless they simply stand for value orientations and power in relation to social status. Rather than celebrating the honesty and directness of these personal images infused with irony and humour, as the cultural voice of Damara artistry, he reiterates the moral imprecations of Vedder: he generalises from a distance. To a certain extent every individual photographer also took part in this political debate around Damara identity, expressed in negative characterisations such as "We are sick" or "I don't know what is wrong with our people". These statements were always made in the context of discussions of Damaras in relation to other ethnic groups - this conflict between ethnic and national identity is central to post-colonial Namibian politics, but the way in which it is manifested in Damara discourse is indicative of a long history of political and economic marginalisation.

My objective in constructing this ethnography, which is based more on notions of place rather than ethnicity (Rodman 1992; Duncan & Ley 1993), is not primarily aimed at analysing the discourse of identity, indeed I have said very little so far about how individuals see themselves in this regard. But since identity is ultimately political, it is worth noting how politics are conducted within this ethnic framework. It is interesting that the views of Theo-Ben Gurirab of the ruling nationalist SWAPO political party and those of the Damara 'King', Justus //Garoeb, the leader within the opposition United Democratic Front (UDF) converge around the moral implications of low status and weak pride in a Damara identity. This might also be said to reflect the low status and lack of respect which the Damara give to their leaders! To the limited extent that Damara ethnicity is a significant component in any attempt to construct an ethnography of the 'communal inhabitants of Okombahe and Damaraland' the issue of the creation and

reproduction of Damara identity is essential to understanding social relationships within networks of authority, leadership, patronage and institutionalised power.

### The King's Day

Once a year, the Damara leadership hold what has come to be known as the 'Damara Cultural Festival' in Okombahe. During the height of the Damara council's power in the 1980's this event was the focus of political rallies and the gathering of Damara speakers from throughout Namibia to assert their position within the freedom struggle and the independence which was sure to follow. When I attended it during two days of November in 1995, I was told that its popularity had seriously declined in recent years - what had brought several thousand participants together ten years ago could now muster only a few hundred. The central event of two days of celebration took place in the now derelict and vandalised stadium, built by the Damara 'Second Tier' (Homeland) Authority next to the village cemetery during its heyday in the early 1980s. The central podium backs onto the graveyard almost forming an extension to it, a link with the dead, itself commemorating former 'kings' and leaders of the people. From here, the introductions and eulogies to the Damara leaders were delivered to an assembly of school children and adults, mostly from Okombahe itself, a small proportion having come from Omaruru, Usakos, Walvis Bay and Windhoek.

The "King's" (*Gaob*) 'Message to the Nation' was titled: "The fire shall not be extinguished" (/Aes ge /ai titesa) and began with a joke:

Before I start my speech, I want to refer to the previous speaker who said: 'A woman is a lovely thing' (tare hoes ge /nam/namsa). This made me think of somebody else who said: 'Without a woman you can't go on - even if she is there, you can't go on!'

The irony of this incipient pessimism characterises themes which are elaborated through homilies, metaphors and lessons in Damara history - approached through an explicit appeal to 'The Damara Nation', and tempered by a moderate nationalism: "We are not separating ourselves from the other people of Namibia. It is not like that. Rather, in the garden of our



country grow many types of flowers (bloemdi). That means we have different manners and habits and to celebrate these differences is not an act of separation, but a way of giving life to the different 'bloemdi' of Namibia". Like Theo-Ben Gurirab, *Gaob* //Garoeb calls on the Damara language as a basis for identity, going back to the tower of babel to substantiate the Damara antiquity: "ours is one of the oldest remaining cultural traditions (!*Khuriti* ) and although it is small, you must take this message into your hearts". He calls on the ancestral leaders and their message as passed down through the generations and now to be pronounced once again through the king: "Stay near to receive your inheritance and receive their message". Incredibly, the message is almost post-modern in its simplicity and insight into the nature of socially constructed worlds:

A person's identity is built on what he believes himself to be. Do not believe that you are on the side of evil or that you cannot have what others are having. Do not evaluate yourself by saying 'I am the person who did such and such in the past' but rather say: 'I am the child of my father and mother, in the present, now!

Identity is located in descent and the emotionally charged metaphor of 'blood'. //Garoeb then addresses the issue of Damara inferiority: "Why are you letting yourself live like a foreigner in your own country? Maybe you don't know that this is your fatherland and this is why you feel ashamed" He sets about answering this problem in the same manner as Theo-Ben Gurirab, by conflating the past with the present, appealing to prehistory through place names, and by avoiding the connections which so obviously exist between poverty and the expression of culture: "While the Damara people were first naming this land the only other people here were the Bushmen... the country itself will testify to our history". He refers to the history of conflict between the Damaras and the Ovambos, their more recent coalition in the freedom struggle and finally to the national symbols of Namibia which bear many of the signs of Damara tradition: the colours of the flag (the blue and green of the two Damara factions prominent in the early 20th century), the county's emblem (the gemsbok), the Damara author of the national anthem, the Damara prime minister, foreign minister and many others. Blood, descent and then citizenship are evoked as markers of Damara identity: "First of all you must realise in yourself that 'I am also a

person' and that 'I am a citizen of this country'. . . After realising this then you should look to whether you own a house. . ."

The somewhat disingenuous advice which follows is worth quoting at length because it has a direct bearing on several themes which emerged in the discussion of the individual photographers in the previous chapter. These include the importance of owning a house and being independent, definitions of gender and the important place which women occupy as carriers of continuity and cultural identity.

Honourable people, if you do not own a house, *then you are not a person and no one else will see you or respect you*. And now, if you are having a house, is it a municipal house or is it your own? It is good that you are having houses in the townships, but on the other hand, these are just borrowed houses and we must prepare our own houses which will belong to us forever. So start building a house which you can say "this is mine". You must start to collect some drums and other building materials and put them on the site of your house so you can say: 'this is my place'. When one day you lose your job, you can come and stay there and during holidays your children can take a look at donkeys, goats and cattle. It's good that you take your families down to Swakopmund and sleep in bungalows, but all this is only for a very short time. By that I mean, you will take your family on such holidays only while you are getting a salary, but you should try to get a place for the time when you no longer have a salary, and you will have a place to live in the future. For you ladies, wait a little while before buying that furniture, and you men, wait a little longer before buying that car and rather start buying some goats and cattle for yourself and your family's future. Don't buy that TV but use that money to purchase some goats and a year from today those goats will have multiplied and you can sell some to buy that TV and still have a kraal. You men, do the same as I told the ladies and rather than buy a car, use that money to buy a cow or goats or a tractor because you can sell livestock again after two or three years and your kraal will still remain.

While the sentiment expressed in this exhortation might appeal to many people listening in the audience, //Garob's target would seem to be a small minority of people who earn salaries, who take holidays in bungalows, who buy TVs and cars - these things are way beyond the means of most people living in Okombahe. Like his appeal to history and language, the emotional attachment to place and the sense of security which that implies in the myth of Damara nationhood is called up as a practical solution to 'feeling like a foreigner in your own country'. But the prospect of losing your job and

having to retreat to the risky environment of communal farming can hardly be said to raise confidence and pride in a Damara identity!

I want to retain our Damara surnames as they have been in the past: a woman should not use a 'b' instead of 's' at the end of her surname. For example Nuwaseb is a man and Nuwases is a woman. Some women are using a 'b' at the end of their names and that is not the way it should be. They say that insurance companies are not paying if a wife's name is different from her husbands, and so if her husband's name is ‡Nuseb then she is also ‡Nuseb: this spoils the language. You have the right to change your surname if you want to but, you should remember what the owners of our language will think of you. Then if I say "There stands Anna Xoagub", then I am saying that person is a 'homo' which means they are both male and female.

Here, the seriousness of the opening joke is alluded to again (even if she is there, you can't go on): as the bearers of Damara identity, women lend continuity to family life and social cohesion, but in spite of this, a history of poverty, lack of effective leadership, political fragmentation, and oppression built upon ethnic division still serves to undermine the pride which //Garoeb would instil in 'his' people.<sup>9</sup> Even the dress code of 19th century missionaries wives, adapted by converted Damara women during the last 100 years (and now a symbol of cultural continuity), is drafted in to confirm a civilising code of traditional values serving to define and instil respect in Damara identity:

Now I will ask the grandmothers to give instruction to the young ones who will also wear the long (traditional) dress, as a lady. This dress carries with it a mark of respect - for example, if you want to speak to a woman wearing such a dress you must not shout at her from far away, but come close and speak gently. If a woman wants to turn around in such a dress she will not turn in a rough manner but turn in a soft and cool way. Woman do not jump about dancing in this dress but will dance a cool soft dance.

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<sup>9</sup> These remarks were made in the context of a heated public debate around a draft act of Parliament (The Married Persons Equality Act 1995) which was eventually passed and established equality of women's rights in marriage. Many prominent politicians and traditional leaders opposed the act on the grounds that it would undermine 'traditional Namibian family values'; //Garoeb, in calling for the retention of gender distinctions in naming practices, emphasises the relative equality of Damara gender relations. His position with regard to homophobia would seem to be more ambiguous.



Gender, class and race are key ingredients in the construction of discourses on social identity: they belong to a basic folk model of what it means to be a Damara man, woman, child. . . . As such, these concepts constitute ideal subjective roles which define difference in terms of group identity as well as individual positions within the group. Since difference structures discourse, and the concepts of race, class, ethnicity and gender intersect in ways which create a multiplicity of subject positions, the resultant multiple discourses become hierarchically ordered with the result that some come to be accepted as dominant or ideal, and others develop into oppositional subdominant discourses (or subjectivities). Such a structuring of difference inevitably implicates the relationship between subjective fantasies of power and fantasies of identity (Moore 1994: 143).

[. . .] with regard to the relationship between violence and particular forms of difference - gender, race, class - we might come closer to an understanding of the phenomenon if we shift our gaze and move from imagining violence as a breakdown in the social order - something gone wrong - to seeing it as the sign of a struggle for the maintenance of certain fantasies of identity and power (Ibid.: 154).

The issue of violence has been only briefly alluded to so far in this thesis. Gurirab's reference to 'cattle thieves and various other midnight robbers' as well as //Garob's remarks about traditional female dress as a 'mark of respect' are shallow allusions to stock categories constituting Damara identity. Gender categories are less of an issue in terms of 'fantasies of power and identity' than in many ethnic discourses, but at the same time, gender relations and especially women's role in the maintenance in the social order and men's role in its break-down are central to conceptions of a Damara collectivity. Women generally have fewer employment opportunities than men but are never-the-less successful shop-owners, farmers, petty traders, traditional healers and popular community leaders. Women form the core of household units in spite of the tendency for married women to acknowledge their husbands as the household head. Even so, over 40% of households are classified 'female headed' in official government statistics (National Planning Commission 1993: 95-6). Women are also the frequent victims of domestic violence and physical abuse at the hands of their men (Hubbard 1995:61-4), probably indicating the degree to

which Damara men feel threatened by the uncertainties of status attendant on unfulfilled fantasies of masculinity.

Why, given the ethnic hierarchies erected through the forces of colonialism, does a woman like Maria Pietersen Abubakar identify herself as Damara and choose to bring her daughter up as one? Her relatively light complexion, her European/Nigerian surname and command of Afrikaans and English, would confer a higher position within a racial/class hierarchy, albeit on a more subliminal level than previously. At a collective level, there can be no simple answer to this question although Maria's explanation that "Damaraness" is unavoidably matrilineal (conferred in much the same way as "Jewishness"), must be a dominant factor within a specifically Damara discourse which treats hierarchy, racial or otherwise, as ambiguous, arbitrary and ironic.

### **Poor Thirsty People Have Had Enough - Or Have They?<sup>10</sup>**

The forgoing discussion of Damara leaders has only hinted at the fractious nature of political leadership within Damara communities such as Okombahe. The story of my relationship with Erwin Tsuseb (Chapter 2) hinted at the conflicting nature of social relations in the village where a general disaffection with local civic, traditional, church and business leaders seemed to comprise a classic example of the dynamics of petty patronage in an environment of poverty. The corruption associated with the dispersal of food aid, the allocation of goats as part of a restocking programme, and the blatant manipulation of development projects by local leaders came to a head when a group of disaffected men and women opposed the existing development committee with its own nominees. A public meeting was called and its importance was reflected in the attendance of King //Garob, his councillors and several respected elderly Damara men.

The meeting took place outside in the dilapidated arena near the 'People's House'. Around one hundred and fifty men and women sat in bleachers above the assembled leadership who were arranged in a semi-circle around King //Garob and his chief councillor. The anger of the people was palpable, and as the long-winded opening of the meeting dragged on through prayers and introductory speeches by the chief

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<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 2 (Erwin Tsuseb), where the formation of a 'people's party' was mobilised to oppose the petty corruption of local officials.

councillor, heckling broke out from the assembly: the people wanted a voice. The leaders handled the situation skilfully and were gradually able to appeal to the assembly for calm and deliberation. As the anger of the people became increasingly defused, the village 'idiot' appeared on the scene, sauntering up to the King's table and throwing his hat down shouted: "You've spoken enough! It's time you heard what the people have to say!" The audience's response encouraged him and he continually interrupted the leaders speeches which he insisted had nothing to do with the issues at hand. The audience's laughter quickly gave way to embarrassment and by ignoring him or attempting to mollify his obnoxious behaviour with patience and dignity, the King and his councillors were eventually able to win the audience over to their side and avoid opening the divisive issues which had instigated the meeting in the first place.

When, after several hours of sitting in the baking heat of the afternoon, the time finally came for individuals in the community to voice their complaints, these were muted and couched in metaphors rather than direct accusations of corruption. The regional councillor who was accused of gross incompetence was conspicuous by his absence; his underling, the community development officer who was also accused of embezzlement and favouritism spoke up for himself without rebuttal and the meeting was adjourned with promises that the leadership would consult among themselves and call another meeting in the future. What began as an impassioned attempt by ordinary people to change the way 'democracy' operated locally ended in a somewhat dispirited, fatalistic and pragmatic acceptance of the situation. Gradual change might result, but ultimately, the symbolism of Damara leadership and its association with order and respect won out over the uncertainty and risk attached to open revolt, embodied symbolically in the behaviour of the 'village idiot'.

A similar situation arose when the Department of Agriculture organised a 'participatory appraisal' workshop which was intended to elicit information about the problems of drought, development, tenure and subsistence associated with livestock farming in Okombahe. A camera crew from South Africa was on hand to record the proceedings of two days of group discussion, which took place in the open area afforded by the cool shade of a large grove of Ana trees near the river. By the end of the second day, a general confusion was evident among many of the participants who felt it was a waste of time, since they could hardly be expected to raise issues



related to the organisation of the village development committee, the farmers union and the leadership in general: the risks involved in causing enmity by speaking out were too great for many individuals. The elderly were especially reluctant to complain in case this intelligence found its way back to the powerful clique who controlled the distribution of food aid, drought relief and even the shop keepers to whom many were indebted. The presence of video recording equipment only exacerbated this fear.

Many similar examples of how the politics of local patronage operate in underdeveloped rural areas throughout various 'ethnic' communities in Namibia are common. What seems to typify leadership structures in Damara communities such as Okombahe is a weak articulated hierarchy associated with the levelling tendencies of gossip, a social structure based on shifting kinship alliances and a form of individualism which results from the Damaras' specific history of social and economic marginalisation. Rural and pastoral development initiatives based on the notion of 'community participation' will continue to flounder as long as project managers fail to address this fundamental fact of community fragmentation and the ambivalence attached to an ineffective leadership in the context of distorted and weak political community organisation.

## **Conclusion**

This final chapter of Part I has only succeeded in airing a few of the issues pertaining to discourse, identity, social relations and leadership structures implicated by the Okombahe photographs and expanded in my discussion of their political significance. By highlighting some of the most commonly stated positions on Damara identity, through the words of Damara politicians, I hope to have opened the succeeding chapters to a more detailed discussion of the historical imagination in the making of contemporary Okombahe. It represents an axis in the thesis where the ethnographic content becomes increasingly dependent on historical, geographical, and sociological narratives. The following chapters elaborate some of the issues which have been raised thus far, and focus increasingly on the pastoral economy which is both the underpinning and outcome of social relations and environmental circumstances.

## **PART II**

### **HISTORY AND THE MEANING OF PLACE**

## CHAPTER 4

### OF RECOLLECTION AND OF FORGETTING

Our stories add to a growing list of other stories, not listed in a logic of linearity to fit into a coherent body of knowledge, but as a series of cultural constructions, each representing a particular view of the world [. . .] These stories are to be read not as approximations to a reality, but as tales of how we have understood the world; to be judged not according to a theory of correspondence, but in terms of their internal consistency and their value as moral and political discourse.

Cosgrove & Domosh in *Place/ culture/ representation* (1993:37-8)

I say this not to ward off objections that I'm trying to make you listen to a [. . .] story I don't even remember, but to clarify the fact that not remembering it is at a certain point necessary to make the story this one and not another, in other words while a story usually consists in the memory you have of it, here, not remembering the story becomes the very story itself.

Italo Calvino in *Time and the hunter* (1967: 61)

There are several versions to the story of how /Â ‡Gomes (wet flanks) got its name. They all centre around the plight of a thirsty hunter, his dogs and the fortuitous discovery of permanent water in the bed of the ephemeral ‡Eseb (Omaruru River). Having become separated from his hunting companions and being far from home, tired and thirsty, the hunter wandered in the thornveld. He had used up his small supply of water and the days were very hot. His hunting had come to nothing and even his dogs were unable to find him in the thick bush after an unsuccessful chase. Late one afternoon, as he was about to resign himself to another night of suffering thirst, his dogs returned to him - their flanks were wet and so he followed their tracks back to the source of this water. Here he found perennial springs welling up from the dry sandy river bed, and lay down in it like his dogs and drank to slake his thirst. The lush vegetation lining the river banks and the abundance of game which the water attracted to this place quickly convinced the hunter to bring his people to settle here.

The name /Â ‡Gomes commemorates this simple story of endurance and discovery. The place name is a metaphor for the experience of precarious survival through hunting, its association with animal instinct, with the connectedness of instinct and consciousness . It is also a literal allusion to the physical aspect of the river itself; it wells up out of its underground pathway here and runs for several hundred metres along the



wide sandy river bed, forming pools and permanent streams, wetting the flanks of the otherwise dry expanse of the †Eseb River.

The village of Okombahe is about 4 kilometres long and in many places only a few hundred metres wide, being strung out along both banks of the Omaruru River, dwellings closest to the river being high enough to avoid the torrential floods which sporadically descend from the upper catchment. Three gravel roads and many smaller donkey cart tracks descend into the village traversing the long gradient between watersheds to the north and south, a distance of some forty kilometres across: Okombahe is dispersed along the central crease of this broad river basin.

The village is build around comparatively lush riverine vegetation, giving it an oasis-like feeling and an intimacy with distinct neighbourhoods within the settlement as a whole. The village is dissected by the open expanse of river which only flows sporadically throughout the summer months, depending on the amount of rain falling upstream in the Omaruru River catchment. The wetlands which drew the mythical hunter and his dogs emerge near the centre of the settlement and run for some two and a half kilometres downstream, although the extent of these shrink to only a few hundred metres or dry up altogether after several years of below average rainfall.

The village offers some degree of respite from the relentlessness of the huge, dry surrounding veld - a sanctuary of cool shade, the soothing green of tall Ana trees, the deep shadow of alien Prosopis, neatly laid out date plantations gone wild, small gardens of mealies, tin shacks and mud-brick houses surrounded by fences and hedges protecting yards where perhaps a few pau-pau, banana or lemon trees flourish, with unexpected flashes of colour from cultivated flowers. Yet from any vantage point within the village, some distant and dramatic landscape feature dominates the horizon, imposing a monumental sense of scale into this domesticity: //Ganeb, the koppie from which Okombahe takes its name in Oshiherero, a steep intrusion of black basalt 500 metres high, dominating the village as the graceful silhouette of a grazing giraffe to which the name refers; behind this and forty kilometres to the south-east, the jagged granite cliffs fronting the sunken dome of the Erongo mountains, like a rainmaker, attracting clouds from an otherwise empty sky and drawing lazy dust devils out of adjacent heat struck plains; and 80 kilometres to the west the glowing Dâures or Brandberg, a massive red granite inselberg rising some 2,000 metres above

the surrounding plain, visible from Okombahe as a hazy presence marking the edge of the Namib desert. In spite of the coterminous intimacy of the settlement, its inhabitants dwell within the larger landscape where distant mountains demarcate a dispersed, unbounded 'neighbourhood', where the senses easily expand into a vast physical space because of an experienced familiarity with widely separated farm settlements linked together by a highly mobile population.

Okombahe's first 'permanent' Damara inhabitants were drawn from these surrounding plains and mountain fastnesses during the 1870s, often as hungry, dispossessed refugees attracted by missionary activity, trade and the opportunities afforded by a protected settlement with permanent water. Within less than ten years this promising 'transformation' of a marginalised and impoverished population was to be reversed by several decades of instability and insecurity punctuated first by protracted drought, and then ethnic and colonial conflict, epidemics and famine. By the turn of the century, some semblance of stability had been established in Okombahe, primarily by way of a garrison of German soldiers and the Rhenish Mission. During the Herero/German war of 1904-7, the Damara in Okombahe remained neutral, if not pro-German and this event more than any other, gave the settlement its predominantly Damara identity: the German governor 'rewarded' the Damara leadership by setting it aside as a 'Damara Reserve' in 1906 (Köhler 1959). During the 20th century Okombahe grew slowly into the administrative centre of what would become an enlarged Damara labour reserve until 1970, when it was reduced to the status of a ward centre as a consequence of its incorporation into the newly created 'Damaraland'.

Today, Okombahe continues to act as a 'refuge' and locus of (limited) opportunities. The process set in motion by the missionaries in the late 19th century is still in evidence as people from the outlying farms gravitate to the expanding village. During the intervening period, major social, economic and political processes have in some ways 'transformed' the social economy of the village, however many of the environmental and economic factors which led to the settlement of Okombahe during the late 19th century continue to operate. While it is tempting to see Okombahe as "a village which represents the true cultural museum of the way the Damara people live" (Eiseb 1994:58), this is definitely not my purpose in what follows. I prefer to interpret Okombahe as a narrative in its own right, having come

into being through praxis, phenomenological experience and as historical discourse where place becomes constituted in "the temporary grounding of ideas as overlapping narratives" (Rodman 1992:652).

### **Issues in Local Historiography**

This chapter presents an outline of Okombahe's history during the first seventy years of its existence as a permanent settlement. Much of this history takes the form of a de-centred discourse comprising one of the many overlapping narratives which define Okombahe as a geographical, social, economic and political place. This discourse forms a continuity with the demographic, economic and political conditions of the Okombahe I came to know during the mid 1990s. By contextualising historical evidence with contemporary conditions I am seeking to generate comparable categories of data. I am looking for correspondences between my experience of contemporary Okombahe with the de-centred narratives constructed by historians such as Brigitte Lau (1979; 1985; Lau & Reimer 1993), Ben Fuller (1993)<sup>1</sup> and Jan-Bart Gewald (1996). Oswin Köhler's studies published by the Department of Bantu Administration and Development (1958; 1959), and more recently, anthropological dissertations written by Robert Gordon (1972) and Sandra Brown (1991) provide detailed insights into the continuity and change affecting Okombahe's narrative history. More recent census data and livestock statistics indicate some of the dynamics behind short-term demographic fluctuations related to droughts; rainfall records as well as aerial and archival photographs add a further layer of detail to this analysis of Okombahe's social history which will be addressed in more detail in the following chapters. Hopefully, the end result of tying this crude, aggregated sociological data down in its relation to ethnographic detail, will be to convey a sense of the meaning which inheres to Okombahe as a place and to develop a plausible account of what Damara identity is all about.

To understand Okombahe as a politicised, culturally relative place, it is also necessary to examine the whole notion of Damara identity in relation to historical processes, some of which have been discussed in the preceding chapters. Were it not for the fact that most of my friends and informants

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Fuller's PhD thesis (1993) while it is not concerned specifically with Okombahe is useful for the analogies which it provides from historical accounts of 'mixed Damara' settlements such as Sesfontein and Otjimbingwe.



claimed a Damara identity, I might have dismissed the whole business as unnecessary essentialization. Rather than serving to reify a particular set of norms and practices, Damara identity legitimates practical strategies and opportunities in terms of residence, kinship, and reciprocity which might not otherwise exist within Okombahe's ethnically charged historical memory. The Damara might be seen (and see themselves) as both victims and masters of an ethnic confidence trick. Consequently, they have probably never taken the issue of Damara identity as seriously as their ethnically stratified neighbours, the Herero, Nama, Ovambo, Boer etc.

Because we presently lack substantial empirical insight into the Damaras' place in Namibia's social economy before the advance of Cape merchant capital into the country, it is impossible to do anything more than speculate about how Damara identity might have been transformed by these events. In looking at the processes which have brought the Damara to their present place within the national social formation - by comparing historical accounts of Okombahe with the ethnographic material presented by more recent studies - including this one - it is possible to speculate on the processes through which identity is maintained and reproduced as well as its functionality in the political context of the present. This approach is not to be confused with an historical epistemology which seeks to verify the past by projecting an evaluated present backwards: reifying the past in terms of the present. The idea that even a present 'social reality' might somehow be 'verified', presupposes the creation of categories which in themselves are necessarily ideological.

Namibian historiographers have come to recognise the fundamental problem of discussing the past in terms of strictly drawn ethnic distinctions (Lau 1987: 148), a unit of analysis which becomes a necessary compromise given the paucity of detailed documentation relating to the 'natives'. 'Society' has probably only rarely been constituted by anything but a plurality of cultures; a dominant element within society, a hegemonic culture, is rarely passively internalised: rather it is more commonly negotiated, resisted or selectively appropriated by people in everyday life (Duncan & Ley 1993:11) Might not the Damara response to pressures of exploitation - clientage, amalgamation into other ethnic groups, or resistance through retreat - indicate that it is precisely this flexible, 'anti-ethnic' ethnicity which characterise the Damara then and now? Conceptualised neither as an ahistorical tribe in the mode of Vedder or Lebzelter or a

separate social formation in Marxist terminology, but nevertheless identified as Damara (ǀNu Khoi, Hau Khoi, !Hommi Daman, Chou Damab etc.): a constituent part of what is now thought of as the single social formation of Namibia. As Edward Said so vividly points out, the categories of race, nations, tribes, essences or modes of production are all testaments to "an ideology whose cultural correlatives will precede the actual accumulation of imperial territories worldwide" (1993:68). That these 'cultural correlatives' persist in Namibia, in various forms including the very language of historical revisionism, is also testament to the depth and power of the colonial experience.

Recent attempts to revise the history of late 19th century Central Namibia use Okombahe as an illustration of changing social relations of production alongside the growth of merchant capital in the country (see Lau 1979; 1985; 1987; 1995; Lau & Reiner 1993). Emphasis is placed on Okombahe's position as the "centre of peasant production for the whole of central Namibia in the 1870s" (Lau 1985:8) and as a prime example of the proletarianisation of 'native' Namibians as they were drawn into the web of merchant capital as cheap labour and consumers (Moorsom 1973). The rapid simultaneous development of settlements such as Okombahe in west-central Namibia during the 1860s and 1870s came about as a result of the spread of merchant capital, missionary activity and the gradual concentration of power within emerging Herero and Nama polities. Otjimbingwe, Okahandja, Omaruru, Okombahe and Ameib, all to varying degrees, shared characteristics of recently established settlements that drew a variety of European traders, adventurers and missionaries, along with large numbers of Herero who took part in the expanding trade, Damara who joined the trader's retinues as servants and labourers, along with smaller numbers of Nama, Bastard and Coloured people who had been recently displaced from other areas in central Namibia. This rapid proliferation of settlements was also associated with the occurrence of drought which prompted resettlement by pastoralists.<sup>2</sup> All were established on sites of permanent springs; in all but Ameib, river cultivation became an important factor in the settlement's success. But perhaps too much weight has been placed on the economic aspect of social transformation which supposedly

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<sup>2</sup> Zeruau and his followers left Otjimbingwe during the 1868 drought to settle Omaruru, the Swartbooi Namas moved from Amieb to Springbokfontein in the same year, and settled Okombahe in 1870.

turned hunters and herders into peasants and the proletariat. Assessments as to the 'sizeable scales' of agricultural development in settlements such as Okombahe, Otjimbingwe and Omaruru seem rather misplaced if as Lau asserts, they really only yielded between 600 and 3,000 kg. of grain per annum (Lau 1985:9; 1987:62).<sup>3</sup> And while traders brought the general populace into a cash economy at the lowest level, through a system of credit they succeeded in extending and maintaining economic dependency (Lau 1979:92; Pool 1991:181)<sup>4</sup>. Many individuals continued to vacillate between their hunting, gathering, herding and trading past in the 'bush', with new found opportunities in the labour market. Settlements such as Okombahe became half-way houses for such radical changes. The agency of Herero and then European hegemony depended on controlling the productive forces in settlements such as Okombahe.

It might be inferred from the scattered references in historical sources from the first half of the 19th century that Damara groups readily incorporated many marginalised individuals from 'Saan', 'Bushmen', impoverished Namas and Ovatjimba (Lau 1979:31). Such a process of incorporation might well have typified the formation of groups prior to this time known as Zoutama, Zambdama (Wikar *in* Mossop 1935), Damarassen (Van Reenen *ibid.*) ‡Nu Khoen and eventually as Dama, a process which was evident in the late 19th century as well as throughout the 20th century into the present.<sup>5</sup> The Damara/Nama speaking 'Bushmen' of the Etosha and Tsumeb areas almost certainly represent a variant of this theme, thrown up by the process of boundary formation and group fission among the peoples of Namibia's pre-colonial history.

Reports prior to the settlement of Okombahe describe the Damara as wealthy cattle herders (Wilmsen 1989:94), skilled smiths and long-distance traders (Wikar *in* Mossop 1935:33,79). They grew tobacco and dagga, which they sold or exchanged, worked as herders and labourers for Nama pastoralists, and by the time they appear with any clarity or definition in the

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<sup>3</sup> Such relatively small yields represent a minor seasonal supplement to staple diets based on animal products and veld foods. 780 kg. of grain is the amount needed by a Sahelian family of seven in order to supplement a pastoral diet based on the ownership of 44 cattle, based on Dahl & Hjort's modelling (1976). See Rohde (1992).

<sup>4</sup> This symptom of dependency in Okombahe's social economy was evident during the first decade of settlement (1870s) and persists into the present. The coincidence of missionary and mercantile activity is worth noting: Okombahe's first resident trader was the brother-in-law of Daniel Cloete, the settlements first resident missionary (Lau 1979:91).

<sup>5</sup> For references to the persistence of inter-ethnic marriage as a contemporary feature of Damara identity see Chapters 1 & 2.



historical record, had become largely dependent and marginalised as a result of the changing social relations created through the expansion of Cape merchant capital.

The first accounts of the establishment of Okombahe as a permanent settlement describe it as a refuge for several ethnic factions (Hereros under Chief Zeraua, Swartbooi Namas, 'Namaquas', 'Bushmen' and Damara) all of whom were drawn in one way or another, into the conflicts of southern and central Namibia during the late 19th century. Whether or not it is true that "there was a progressive breakdown of the autonomous social existence of 'tribal' boundaries" (Lau 1985:4), or as seems more likely, the processes of ethnogenesis were already advanced as part of the practice and ideology of merchant capital and colonialism which engulfed the country, it seems clear from the scant documentation available that the Damara had by this time become a residual category denoting a class position of marginalised people from a number of ethnic backgrounds. Their incorporation into the new Herero controlled mission station of Okombahe replicated a process which had swept southern Namibia earlier in the 19th century as autonomous groups of Damara and Nama were incorporated into the political and economic hegemony of the advancing Cape Oorlams.<sup>6</sup>

The whole premise of basing identity on ethnicity is a function and product of what the Comaroffs refer to as "the asymmetric incorporation of structurally dissimilar groupings in a unified political economy" (1992: 54). Within this process of incorporation a distinction might be drawn between ethnic conflict in the context of power struggles over territory and resources, and ethnic identity supposedly maintained through marriage practices based on notions of 'blood' or 'race'. The flexibility of ethnic divisions during Okombahe's early history as a mission settlement would suggest that inter-ethnic marriages were common. Von Eckenbrecher, who lived in Okombahe between 1902 and 1904 remarked that social stratification and high status amongst 'old' Damara families was often associated with intermarriage with

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<sup>6</sup> Oorlam migration into southern Namibia during the early 19th century was a direct consequence of the expansion of the Cape Colony: as Boer farmers moved further inland from the urban centre, resident Khoisan populations were dispossessed. Communities disintegrated in response to the new frontier institution which emerged, composed of largely autonomous groups who became known as Oorlams - "Hottentots who are born and bred with the farmers" (Legasic 1979, quoted in Lau 1987:20). Their access to firearms made the commando unit a powerful vehicle for hunting and raiding in the frontier zone. This zone gradually pushed north into central Namibia and depended largely on trade relations with European merchants and missionaries.

Hereros and Coloureds (quoted in Gordon 1972:51)<sup>7</sup> The fragile peace across ethnic (class) divisions was often broken by sudden violence during the late 19th century and coincided with periods of drought, epidemics and economic decline.

Lau asserts that many Damara had come to Okombahe because they were "impoverished, socially disintegrated bands who saw no more possibilities to reproduce their own social relations of production under new circumstances" (1979:96). However, due to the precariousness of social, economic and climatic conditions obtaining in Okombahe at this time, many recently settled Damaras resumed their previous existence as foragers and hunters during the severe drought between 1883 and 1891.<sup>8</sup> It was probably no accident that this period also coincided with episodes of violent conflict between the inhabitants of Okombahe resulting in the departure of Daniel Cloete with his Damara followers and a general disaggregation of the population from the settlement into the surrounding area (Kohler 1959:33). At the same time, Damaras were being 'exported' as labour to the Cape Colony with the help of the British magistrate at Walvis Bay who actively recruited in Okombahe, Otjimbingwe and the surrounding territory (Palgrave 1991:315, 345, 355; Gewald 1993:5; 1996: 79-81; Vedder 1938:442).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Okombahe photographers often ascribed 'mixed marriages' to their parents or grandparents and yet all but one called themselves 'Damara'. Gewald (1993) suggests a similar phenomena might be taking place in the context of enhanced land rights for Bushmen in Bushmanland, prompting Hai//om to relinquish any links with a Damara identity. In Damaraland, the obverse is also common, as individuals from mixed marriages with Herero surnames align themselves to a Damara identity for a combination of practical, ideological and affective reasons.

<sup>8</sup> See Union of South Africa, (1935: 80) for periods of drought as compiled from missionary reports between the years 1771 and 1934. According to these, the three years prior to 1870 when the Swartboois moved to Okombahe from Amieb at the foot of the Erongo mountains were severe drought years when the Swakop did not reach Otjimbingwe and the springs at Okahandja dried up. During the low rainfall period between 1883 to 1891 'natives were prevented from making gardens' probably referring to the situation in both Otjimbingwe and Okombahe.

<sup>9</sup> Beginning in the early 1860s Johan van Reenan (whose ancestors had slaved in Namibia), recommended the introduction of Berg-Damara labour into the Cape Colony. As a result of the commissions of W.C. Palgrave during the 1870s a labour agent was appointed "for collecting Berg-Damaras" (Gewald 1996: 79) as indentured labour for the colony. Gewald (ibid.) documents the extensive recruitment network established by the intermediaries of labour agents and independent traders at the instigation of the Cape Colony's Native Affairs Department during this period. During the early 1880s, "prolonged drought, which not only limited the availability of *veldkos* but also the reduced pasturage for Berg Damara stock and thus also the possibility of Berg Damara herding for others, as well as continuing dispossession of Berg Damara territory by both Herero and Nama encroachment, led to the creation of an ever growing number of impoverished people. The reports, almost without exception, refer to the Berg Damara as being 'all in a most deplorable condition'" (ibid.:79).

Lau concludes that class formation was in evidence during these early years of Okombahe's history and that the productivity and wealth generated through garden cultivation and trade depended on 'labour and services from many others around the station who were probably too impoverished to keep goats or raise tobacco and tried to live off hunting and veldkos collection' (Lau 1983:9). It is a plausible assumption from a Marxist perspective but there is too little data to support it. In fact, there is little to differentiate what Lau refers to as the 18th century 'Damara mode of production' i.e. "specialised co-operative hunting, goat and sheep breeding, production of specialised trade goods like tobacco, a fragmented political structure" (1979:13), from what we know about the social economy of Okombahe during the 1870s. Furthermore, it seems likely that what Lau describes as a 'transformation' in the Damara social-economy of Okombahe was only the latest manifestation of a recurrent pattern. If one accepts that such a 'Damara mode of production' existed before the incursion of merchant capital into southern Namibia and was varied internally, it would have given rise to social stratification within and between Damara groups in much the same way as that described by Lau in Okombahe. There is nothing to suggest that the trade and livestock economy in which the Damara took part was anything more than skilled opportunism occasioned by the socio-economic niches which arose within the more specialised and increasingly organised polities of the Damara's neighbours. The argument that settled life in Okombahe, built on notions of "private property, Christian values and ideology, and peasant production"(Lau 1979:47) was substantially different from the social interaction practised in previous times by Damara living as foragers, hunters, herders, traders and coppersmiths might possibly be true, but must remain completely unsubstantiated. It might be just as convincingly argued that Damara social relations of production remained largely unchanged throughout both the pre-colonial and colonial periods. However, there is no doubt that by the late 19th century when the Damara sought refuge in Okombahe, their ability to survive as autonomous scattered groups, in an unpredictable marginal environment had become untenable with the onslaught of organised raiding and the domination by a few individuals of a new merchant capital economy.



## Colonizing 'Wet Flanks' : 1860 - 1894

The early history of Okombahe is a chronicle of unequal inter-ethnic conflicts arising from sudden and increased trader and missionary activity. Its first 30 years as a permanent settlement were marked by periods of rapid development through cultivation and trade intercut by violent episodes of inter-ethnic fighting, epidemics, severe drought and famine resulting in major movements of the population. Its usefulness as a source of indentured and cheap labour, first to the Hereros and then to the Germans, led to its becoming Namibia's first labour reserve.

In reviewing the limited historical sources on the history of Okombahe one is struck not only by its inherent ideological bias, but also by the descriptive 'fuzziness' common to early reports upon which later histories have been constructed. These include the testimony of missionaries, British and German government officials, traders, hunters, sportsmen and scientific explorers, in short, almost exclusively the observations of European males. The most extreme example of overt bias can be found in the propaganda used by the British and Germans to legitimate and secure their interests South West Africa after the First World War. The *Report on the natives of south-west Africa and their treatment by Germany* (Union of South Africa 1918) and the German response to it - *The treatment of native and other populations in the colonial possessions of Germany and England*, published in 1919 were each jockeying for the moral high ground of a righteous colonial past in order to influence the decision of the League of Nations regarding South West Africa's status as a 'mandated territory'. Both accounts resort to a potted history of Okombahe when discussing the effects of colonialism on the 'Berg-Damaras' or 'Klip Kaffirs'. Accordingly, the British version makes use of the much quoted article by the Rev. Hugo Hahn who published an account in the *Cape Monthly Magazine* (1877:219-230) of his visit to Okombahe in 1871. During his sojourn of probably no longer than one week, Hahn describes the conditions of the settlement in a generally favourable light, due primarily to the paternal care of the 'coloured native of the Colony' Mr. Daniel Cloete, who accomplishes the 'missionary work at this station very efficiently and faithfully'. The Bergdamaras are characterised as having "a great talent for vocal music" but "otherwise they are intellectually below the neighbouring nations" - "They are industrious, provident and make very good servants, but at the same time are very stubborn" (1877:221)! Apart from perpetuating

such racist claptrap, Hahn was probably one of the first to articulate what has since become the most often repeated and hackneyed essentialisms regarding the Damara: "The Bergdamaras are a nation whose language and past history remains an insoluble riddle" (ibid.:220).

Damara oral histories claim that during the mid 1860s, Abraham Goroseb and small band of /Gobanin Damara<sup>10</sup> settled in Okombahe (Lebzelter 1932:112; Union of south Africa 1918:105). By 1870, a group of Swartboois Namas under the tutelage of Daniel Cloete, a teacher in the service of the Rhenish Mission had joined the /Gobanin Damaras and within a few years several hundred Damara from the surrounding plains and mountains were drawn to the settlement (Kohler 1959:15-22). Having heard that Okombahe had become a place of refuge, many of them seem to have taken advantage of the economic opportunities afforded by the security of the village, its suitability for garden cultivation and the availability of markets. In 1871, Hahn observed that many Damara had embraced Christianity, wore European clothes ("a good many were decently clad") and up to seventy children attended school.<sup>11</sup> (1877:220). His remarks regarding the local economy are especially interesting as they shed some light on the extent to which the lucrative trade in ostrich feathers affected the local population:

Here the diamond and gold fever do not exist, but the feather fever does, and this epidemic is infectious. [. . .] it is not beneficial for the general welfare of the people that ostrich feathers fetch such high prices. Everybody thinks only of hunting and bartering [. . .] in the course of three or four years not an ostrich will be seen any where [. . .] and what then? For many it will prove ruinous [. . .] the trade in feathers is itself unsound and has a demoralising effect upon the people. It is a species of gambling [. . .] (1877:230).

Hahn's predictable Protestant moralisations would prove close to the mark during the ensuing years. The lucrative trade which brought easy money, and made the establishment of permanent settlements such as Okombahe possible would produce other excesses such as intensified

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<sup>10</sup> /Gobanin are so-called Damara 'tribal sub-group', but more accurately, it is a geographical designation for Damara speakers residing in the eastern part of central Namibia between Windhoek and Gobabis in the sand veld, hence the literal meaning of the phrase: "Sand Damara".

<sup>11</sup> To which he adds rather whimsically: "but many were out in the field seeking 'feldkost' namely wild roots, honey, here and there a bird, and even mice are not despised; in fact the Bergdamaras consider them a delicacy. And why should they not be so?"

raiding and trade in bonded labour; disruption of the fragile economy due to environmental or political reasons would expose the fragile vulnerability of the whole system. However, all that was yet to come, and the 1870s proved to be a decade of prosperity in Okombahe. Cloete reported that by 1876:

The people who stay at the station are rather industrious to make gardens and to sow corn, so that they progress and are well off... They sow corn, plant tobacco, mealies, pumpkins, watermelons, calabashes etc.. to exchange that with traders for everything they need - cattle, small stock, clothes, guns, powder and lead etc. ... There are some who acquire milk cows and oxen. They exchange these from the whites for corn, from the Namaqua for small stock, from the Herero for guns. They use riding oxen for trek oxen and plough with them... Many want to buy ploughs themselves... (D. Cloete's Station Reports in *ELC Konferenzprotokolle* quoted in Lau 1979:91-2)

And Commissioner Palgrave, who never visited Okombahe and only knew of it by repute and through Hugo Hahn's article in the Cape Monthly Magazine of 1873, was nevertheless highly impressed with the Damaras of Okombahe:

For people who have been so recently reclaimed from a perfectly savage state, the progress they are making is astonishing... They are very industrious and make good servants, and will, I am convinced, by and by be persuaded to look for employment in this [Cape] Colony (Palgrave 1877:52).

Palgrave's remarks might be interpreted as an indication of how marginalised and impoverished these Damara groups had become during the preceding twenty years or so. During the 1850s, Afrikaner Oorlams raided central Namibia so that even Hereros living as far north as Otjitambi<sup>12</sup> fled to the Kaokoveld with their cattle. "In Hereroland itself, there were no more cattle i.e. milk and meat, from which to live" (Pool 1991:16). In the 1860s renewed conflict between the increasingly centralised polities of the Afrikaner Oorlams and Herero was only resolved in 1870 when for the first time in almost three decades a period of peace ensued which left the Hereros in control of Okahandja and acknowledged owners of

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<sup>12</sup> Between Fransfontein and Kamanjab. See Chapter 7 for Andersson's account of travelling in this area in 1861.



Windhoek. This brokered peace created the conditions for the establishment of permanent settlements such as Okombahe.

One of the most important social and political processes affecting the early development of Okombahe was the rapid amalgamation and dissolution of power within the Herero polity. Prior to 1860 Herero political organisation had been characterised by the strongly de-centralising tendencies of transhumant pastoralism. During the early stages of German colonisation the Herero polity had been consolidated into five distinct chieftaincies; by the 1890s, Samuel Maherero had extended his power to the whole of Hereroland and by the time the Rinderpest epizootic struck central Namibia in 1897, he had become the most powerful Herero chief that ever existed. Rinderpest subsequently led to the impoverishment of Herero society, forcing them into a position of dependence on the colonial state. Each stage of this process had its counterpart in events and processes affecting Okombahe and eventually proved to be the deciding factor in the consolidation of Okombahe as a specifically Damara place.

An important source of the Omaruru Herero's economic power lay in their control of Okombahe during the 1870s and 1880s. During this period, Herero pastoralists extended their control over central Namibia, turning its Damara inhabitants into refugees, who once robbed of their pasturage, trekked to Okombahe and attempted to settle there. Since it was one of the few settlements in central Namibia capable of limited horticultural production, the local Herero chief, Manasse, sought to retain control over this potential resource and succeeded in extracting a high levy from the settlement's Damara population in the form of a yearly tribute of agricultural produce as well as labour which could be exported to the Cape "in exchange for trade goods and arms" (Gewald 1996:81). During the 1880s, economic decline in central Namibia was exacerbated by the creation of new trade routes which circumvented Hereroland completely leaving centres such as Otjimbingwe depressed and marginalised. The Herero of Omaruru 'stayed in business' as a trading centre by supervising the "export of Berg-Damara labour via Walvisbay to the labour hungry farms of the western Cape" (ibid.:78).<sup>13</sup> In all likelihood, this trade in Berg Damaras was a result of the

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<sup>13</sup> The control of trade in indentured labourers was fiercely contested by the Herero of Omaruru. In 1883, Chief Manasse's predecessor Tjeherani "attacked, dispersed, captured and killed a number of Berg Damara, who had been gathered together into holding camps by Mr. H. Rydin, an agent of the Ohlsen company operating out of Cape Town". (Gewald 1996: 80) Following this event, all Berg Damara being offered for sale in the colony were

very recent combination of circumstances which not only provided a ready market for such 'goods', but also found both the Herero and the Damaras in attenuated 'social relations of production' as 'masters' and 'slaves'. The Herero word for the Damara, *Ovazorotua* probably gained currency during the decades of the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>14</sup>

By 1891, the onslaught of raiding by Hendrik Witbooi had dispersed Herero from the area between the Khan and Swakop Rivers and at the same time Omaruru had superseded Otjimbingwe as the centre of trade due to its position across the most direct route from Walvis Bay to Ovamboland. The lucrative ivory/feather trade had collapsed during the 1880s as elephants were hunted out and the fashion for ostrich feathers declined in Europe (Wilmsen 1989:122).

In the wake of economic decline came famine and disease. In 1890 and 1891 southern Hereroland was struck by famine. This was the result of both human and natural agency. Due to the Witbooi raids, Herero cattle had been driven off and cornfields destroyed. Added to this, drought, flooding and particularly in 1891, locust swarms initiated a famine which further weakened the inhabitants of southern Hereroland. In 1890 the region was struck by chicken pox, to be followed in the following year by small pox. Though attempts were made to quarantine the sick, nothing could be done to prevent the famished from inadvertently spreading the disease, as they begged and scavenged from post to post for food (Gewald 1996:53-4).

Okombahe had developed into the second largest settlement in western Namibian between 1870 and 1894 consisting of 20 brick houses and 150 pontoks (Ibid.:91) in spite of the effects of drought and disease which had afflicted its inhabitants during this time. The village had been abandoned in 1880 as a result of conflict between the village's Nama and Damara population. A period of below average rainfall ensued during which time the Rhenish Mission was re-established in 1882. Daniel Cloete and his Damara followers only returned from their retreat to Swakopmund and

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'recruited' from areas under the control of the Omaruru Herero. Even during the early 1890s, after the colonisation of the country by German forces, this trade continued and was one of the prime sources of economic power to Chief Manasse of Omaruru (ibid.: 80-1).

<sup>14</sup> For what its worth, Andersson writing in 1850 reported that there was little or no truth in the portrayal of enmity between Herero and Berg Damaras (Wilmsen 1989:110).

Rooibank in 1888 after several violent misadventures precipitated by 'ethnic' conflict.<sup>15</sup>

### **The German Years: 1894 - 1915**

In 1894, the German colonial authorities successfully found a way of appropriating the Herero's source of cheap (Damara) labour for themselves by effectively subjugating the Omaruru Herero to the larger polity now headed by Samuel Maherero as paramount chief, and installing a Berg Damara, Cornelius Goroseb as the first 'paramount chief of the Damara'. Manasse was forced to accept peace with the German colonial authorities by relinquishing control over Okombahe along with "as much grazing land as is necessary for the inhabitant's present number of stock" (*Reichskolonialamt* quoted in Gewald 1996:92); Cornelius Goroseb was in turn contractually bound to supply the colonial state with labour. A German garrison was established in Okombahe to enforce these arrangements.

In 1894, Okombahe was under the chieftainship of Daniel Kariko the nephew of Manasse of Omaruru, but Kariko's control of Okombahe was curtailed insofar as his chieftainship would now only apply to the Herero of the settlement. By 1895 this arrangement had been further eroded to the extent that now Kariko's jurisdiction over the Herero's Berg Damara servants, their gardens and lands would henceforth be placed under the of the German authorities. In spite of this, the German authorities contrived to involve Kariko in the brutal abduction of Berg Damara labourers from the Bokberg (Erongo Mountains) an indication of the colonial government's continued reliance and need of Berg Damara labour. (Gewald 1996: 106)

Consequent to this raid, Kariko was forced to relinquish his authority over the territory of the Bokberg to Manasse of Omaruru and Cornelius Goroseb of Okombahe. In seeking to 'tidy up' the ethnic map, the Germans instituted what was to be a precursor of colonial policy up to Namibia's independence in 1990: 'separate development'. Henceforth, Daniel Kariko no longer had any jurisdiction over even the Herero of Okombahe, who were required to leave the settlement immediately. Fuller sums up the uneasy relationship in which the 'Damaras' found themselves as a result of these events. The

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<sup>15</sup> This 'return migration' like many others was to prove short lived as a severe drought spanning the years 1887 to 1891 brought further hardships to Okombahe's inhabitants.



creation of a Damara 'king' must have come as "something of a surprise to most 'Damaras' at the time because many may not have known they were Damaras in the first place; and in the second, they may not have heard about a single headman living in a remote Native Reserve" (Fuller 1993: 95-6). Cornelius was able to repay the favour to the Colonial government ten years later during the German/ Herero war by remaining loyal to his white masters, giving rise to the popular perception among ensuing generations of Namibians that 'the Damaras' had sold out.

The conditions which precipitated the outbreak of the German/Herero war first came about as trade declined and years of drought were compounded by the rapid spread of Rinderpest in 1897. Livestock and game were severely affected, the mortality among cattle being often as high as 90 percent and causing the virtual collapse of livestock production in Namibia (Schneider 1994). The repercussions of this catastrophe can still be felt today; it marks a water-shed in trading relations between Herero pastoralists and settler farmers. Prior to the outbreak of Rinderpest, Herero herders dominated the cattle trade; this situation was swiftly reversed in favour of the settler farmer "and to the detriment of the trader and especially the Herero people" (ibid.: 149). The cattle and sheep which survived the Rinderpest were subject to a weakened condition which made them susceptible to other diseases such as lung sickness. Nutritional diseases consequently affected the human population of Hereroland.

Scurvy, typhoid, malaria and probably a form of anthrax broke out among the inhabitants of settlements such as Otjimbingwe and approximately 10% of the population died of the disease. People who had been hitherto dispossessed and had sought refuge through settled river agriculture were now joined by those more recently dispossessed of their livestock by Rinderpest and disease as well as the loss of family members through typhoid. We know that at both Otjimbingwe and Omaruru, Herero who had previously lived in the field as pastoralists flocked to these settlements in the hopes of surviving through crop production. Further disaster was to afflict the population as drought and floods reduced the chances of survival through river-bed crop cultivation. (Gewald 1996: 149-150)

The famine of 1898 also affected the Damara of Okombahe who were reported to have dug up the carcasses of cattle buried in the river in order to eat the rotting bone marrow. Cattle carcasses poisoned the river water further compounding the cycle of sickness and death (Köhler 1959).

Cornelius sought permission to expand the border of the reserve in order to cope with increasing demands on scarce natural resources. The convergence of natural disasters was further exacerbated as wells dried up, *veldkos* became exhausted and the owners of surviving livestock moved in the hopes of securing better grazing, and in the process removed the few remaining subsistence resources from those who stayed behind. The rains of 1901 and 1902 stopped early and river-bed crops that did sprout were soon consumed by locust swarms. "Famine stalked the land, to the extent that impoverished Berg-Damaras, deprived of their main staple field food, Uintjes (small bulbs), found sustenance in the voetgangers (locust larvae) [. . .]." (Gewald 1996: 150)

The response of the inhabitants of Hereroland to this series of disasters was desperate: raiding of other people's cattle and livestock increased, black Namibians joined the forced and contract labour gangs needed for the German colonial government's expanding infrastructure, large tracts of 'tribal' lands were sold by desperate chiefs (Wellington 1967) and large-scale migration took place, on both local and regional scales. The Rinderpest and the events which followed in its immediate aftermath had profound effects on the Herero: within a period of a few years the Herero society was impoverished and their independence curtailed. The events of the German/Herero war which began in 1904 had a profound effect on Okombahe insofar as the entire economy of the country, which had been struggling to recover in the aftermath of Rinderpest and drought, would now be further stunted. But the Damara's control of Okombahe was now complete and the Colonial Governor confirmed Leutwein's earlier treaty by granting Okombahe as a Damara Reserve in 1906.

The immediate results of the 'rebellion' were far reaching and permanent:

[. . .] the way was now open for the building of a 'New Germany', a 'Fatherland over the Sea' [. . .] it was peace with a difference; now the whole of Hereroland belonged to the Government and abundant land was available for White settlement. (Wellington 1967)

The period between the end of the Herero/German war in 1907 and the beginning of the First World War in 1914 has been described as that of the "peace of the graveyard" (Dreschler 1980:231) as well as a time "of difficult, and yet determined and defiant, pastoral recovery" (Sylvester 1996:5).

Several mines were opened up by German interests in the vicinity of Okombahe (!Nei ǀeis, !Aobe-/hunis, Paukwab, and /Uis), providing an important source of wage employment to the inhabitants of Okombahe. However, the Damara took a strong dislike to shift work on the mines and by the time many of these mines shut down in the mid 1940s the work force had become dominated by Ovambo migrant labourers (Gordon 1972:53).

During this period, the largest number of sold and leased farms in the territory were located in the district of Omaruru. In spite of a shortage of both capital and livestock, over 1 million hectares were settled in this area alone (Wellington 1967:216). At the same time laws forbidding Natives from owning land, livestock and riding animals were enacted along with pass laws and vagrancy laws. The forces of merchant capital which had disrupted the social organisation of southern Namibia during the 19th century were now institutionalised in the state. It was no longer only the Damara who suffered blatant exploitation as impressed labourers and servants without rights.

### **The Early Union: 1915 - 1925**

The relative security and peace conferred on the occupants of Okombahe during this period of colonial consolidation can be gleaned from the accounts of the incoming South African Administration in 1917. The newly installed magistrate of Omaruru, Major T.L. O'Reilly, at first complained that the Herero of the area had been squatting on unoccupied farms, engaged in theft, poaching and the practice of 'Kaffir-Farming'. He also referred to "the 'astonishing' amounts of stock held by Africans in the district" (Gewald 1996:305).

Daniel Kariko, who had twenty years earlier been the Herero headman of the Okombahe area, was part of a delegation asking O'Reilly "for farms, where we can stay to live, with our Children, for the blind and crippled people and people in work". O'Reilly, who was sympathetic to the Herero's request for land and who obviously favoured them over the Berg Damara of Okombahe commented:

common justice necessitates the granting [to the Herero] of some small corner of our vast area which they call their own, and fairness likewise suggests that they, a prouder and infinitely more superior tribe, should, at any rate, not be allowed to remain in a worse position than



the Berg Damara. At Okombahe the Berg Damaras keep all their stock. The old men and women and the children tend the stock and cultivate the gardens while the young men go to work on the farms. They work better and are on the average more willing than Herero, simply because there is behind that labour a feeling of quasi-independence, the knowledge of a 'Home' to return to occasionally for a rest, where the 'old folks' are living and where the German master cannot dictate and domineer (O'Reilly, *quoted in* Gewald: 1996:307).

Up until 1919 the military government was effectively precluded from alienating lands on a permanent basis, and many black Namibians took advantage of this relaxation of control by deserting their workplaces and settling on vacant Crown Land and unoccupied farms.

Settlements proliferated all over the country. The South African government was caught up in a contradictory situation: on the one hand it sought to control squatting - the official term for reclaiming ancestral land - as much as possible in order to force squatters back into wage labour. On the other hand, it tried to encourage urban blacks to settle in rural areas so as to increase the supply of labour to farms (Werner 1991:49).

The hiatus in land-settlement policy by the military administration meant that a system of temporary monthly grazing licenses was introduced. Black and white stock owners were able to take advantage of this arrangement which was suited to the requirements of pastoralism given the need to move according to the exigencies of highly variable rainfall patterns. "Stock owners unable to afford the development costs of boring for permanent sources of water or building dams were able to practice a form of nomadic pastoralism" (Sylvester 1996:8). Soon, the recovery and growth of black pastoralists' herds on white farms led to fears of labour shortages by white farmers and within days of Namibia's confirmation as a Mandated territory by the League of Nations, (December 17, 1920) a commission was appointed to "investigate the whole question of 'Native Reserves'" (ibid.:11).

## **Conclusion**

In 1923, the rights granted to the Damara by the German government were confirmed with the proclamation of Okombahe as a Native Reserve extending to 173,000 hectares. To the immediate north and east, a Herero

reserve (Otjohorongo) was proclaimed in 1925. This apparent tightening of control over white settler space by confining the black population to tiny Native Reserves, was undermined by the willingness of white farmers to accommodate black workers and their livestock on settler farms, thus enabling Namibian pastoralists to evade the grazing fees imposed within the 'reserves'. In spite of the loss of access to land through grazing licences and the occupation of Crown Land "farm workers were often able to continue to use the scarcity of labour and financial weakness of the farmers to secure comparatively favourable terms of access to a farmer's pasture" (Sylvester 1996: 18). Within central and southern Namibia (the 'Police Zone') over 60 percent of the 'non-white' population lived on white farms in rural areas (Wellington 1967: 296). The eight year drought commencing in 1926, coinciding with a world depression, would however, change this equation dramatically.

Up until this point in Okombahe's history, episodes of drought, disease, and violence had the effect of dispersing the settlement's population. The prolonged period of below average rainfall which occurred between 1883 and 1891 coincided with economic decline, drought, disease and famine causing conflict over the control of scarce natural resources and dwindling markets. In these circumstances, coping strategies took the form of rapid disaggregation, migration or a return to previous subsistence practices such as foraging, hunting and herding small stock in isolated kin-based groups. Ten years later, the effects of the Rinderpest epizootic were compounded by a three year drought between 1900 and 1903 and again, disease, pestilence and famine were the disastrous outcomes. The population of settlements such as Okombahe were now swollen by destitute pastoralists hoping to survive on crop cultivation while at the same time, many people left to join contract labour gangs. Pastoralists who had managed to retain some livestock moved away in the hopes of finding grazing far removed from the social disruption in which cattle raiding had become rife. This episode marks a turning point in Namibian history: as colonial forces gained the upper hand, the indigenous response to socio-economic disruption was turned in upon itself as the possibility of following 'traditional' responses to drought were curtailed. The culmination of this process of containment might be located in the response of the Okombahe inhabitants to the drought of 1926 to 1933.

The following chapter traces the social history of Okombahe from this point into the present by examining indigenous responses to drought, along with economic contingencies and demographic growth. The conceptualization of social life in Okombahe is necessarily grounded in bodily experience, in the minor rituals of daily life and yet cannot be separated from wider ecological, geographical and historical processes. That the colonial experience had a major impact on 'Damara' social formation is not in question; nor is the notion that the colonial experience continues to shape the way Damara understand themselves and the world. The issue here is one of creating a grounded narrative where Okombahe's social history might be conveyed through (and as) a combination of embodied knowledge derived through local, practical experience (which many historians lack) and the conceptualisation of locality as (in Said's words):

zones of control or of abandonment, of recollection and of forgetting, of force or of dependence, of exclusiveness or of sharing, all taking place in the global history that is our element. Exile, immigration and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can therefore provide us with new narrative forms or, in John Berger's phrase, with *other* ways of telling<sup>16</sup> (1989: 225).

Given the paucity of historical material available to this study, I have attempted to outline the early history of Okombahe in terms that will become more understandable as phenomenological experience in the following chapters. Some reference to the historiographic issues affecting the use of social and economic categories has been necessary in order to examine the changing discourse of history itself. Although many aspects of Okombahe's social economy have changed during the twentieth century, the persistence of experiences such as living on the fine line between subsistence poverty and destitution, of coping with drought, and engaging in a variety of subsistence activities such as foraging, herding, stealing, cultivating, trading, running into debt and contract labour are common experiences which have a genealogy stretching back to the earliest records of Okombahe.

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 1 for reference to John Berger and 'Other ways of telling'.



## CHAPTER 5

### ZONES OF CONTROL OR OF ABANDONMENT

[ . . . ] we take meaning to be largely, if not entirely, implicit in practice; we do not see it to reside in abstract schemes or in categories that endure or change in all-or-none fashion. From this perspective, history involves a sedimentation of micropractices into macroprocesses, a prosaic rather than a portentous affair in which events mark rather than make the flow of existence.

Jean & John Comaroff in *Ethnography and the historical imagination* (1992:38)

The historical events portrayed in the previous chapter are now outwith the memories of all but a very few of Okombahe's oldest inhabitants. Oral histories of these times tend to be framed in a bald, uncontextualised, depersonalised narrative, without the continuity of dates and processual sequences which have elaborated my equally bald account. Stories about even the recent past tend to have a timeless, mythical quality about them, especially when they do not involve direct personal experience of the events in question. Here, the construction of historical narratives is invariably related to kinship networks, a classic case being the reproduction of a Damara tribal history through the lineage of its leaders.<sup>1</sup> The most common

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<sup>1</sup> Given the discrepancies between the various recorded accounts of this lineage, its validity as a literal record of names and events is questionable. However, its mere existence in a variety of forms betrays valuable clues about the past and present. The first recorded account of this lineage is found in the 'Report on the natives of South - West Africa' published in 1918 and purports to record the oral history of Okombahe's head-man at the time, Chief Judas Goreseb. The names of fourteen previous Damara 'tribal' leaders are listed. Lebzelter (1928) enumerates a chiefly genealogy of 21 names including Judas' successor, and these are faithfully reproduced by Vedder in 1938 along with imputed dates going back to 1390. Vedder also records several oral history fragments pertaining to Damara leaders and migrations which he claims stem variously from Xhosa, Tswana and Ovambo primogenitors. Chief Justus //Garoeb (1991) subsequently attributed 'dynasties' to these chiefs and proposed a migratory route for the dispersal of the various Damara groups throughout Namibia based loosely on Lebzelter's and Vedder's accounts. During my fieldwork, the Department of Education's Damara Cultural Officer in Khorixas constructed a Damara history around an amalgam of these sources. Some clues as to the ideological purposes involved in constructing such a past are to be found in the political context of the day. For instance, the discourse in which Judas Goreseb refers to the Omene (civilised Damara) and the Chau Damaras (wild Damara) of Okombahe in 1918 has been superseded and elaborated with the changing times. Lebzelter and //Garoeb refer to !Omen as a Damara sub-group located in the area of the present day Otjiwarongo District, but references to Omene in the "Report on the natives of SWA" (Union of South Africa 1918) and the /Gobanin //Garoeb (1991) as being the dynastic root from which the Damara tribes came, has everything to do with legitimating power and class relations and very little to do with past events.

oral histories are of personal experience, of growing up, of courtship and marriage, of forced removals, floods and drought. Many of the biographical narratives retold in Chapter 2 approximate the content, form and style of these tales. Underscoring many of these stories are themes related to drought, economic conditions, mobility and wide social networks. By tracing some of these themes through a longer time-frame, a 'de-centred' narrative of Okombahe's history emerges which begins to identify complex patterns of individual and group behaviour and illuminates past events as well as contemporary ones.

This chapter examines some of the more recent recorded historical accounts of Okombahe and attempts to make sense of these within a broader historical framework. The most salient climatic, social and economic factors affecting the lives of Okombahe's inhabitants during the last 70 years will be outlined in order to establish continuity with the historical narratives presented in previous chapters as well as to provide the necessary link with a discussion of contemporary socio-economic and demographic trends in Okombahe and smaller settlements within the 'reserve'. The historical detail which informs the region's environmental history will be examined at greater length in subsequent chapters.

After political repression and chronic under-development, recurring droughts are probably the most influential factors in the lives of Okombahe's inhabitants. The absence of severe drought during the 23 year period between 1935 and 1958, was crucial to the relative prosperity of reserve residents during this time, which Theo-Ben Gurirab and other 'old-time' people recall as Okombahe's 'heyday', as a 'self-sustaining community of a proud people'. Similarly, the persistence of drought since the late 1970s probably accounts for the 'numbing amnesia' which is referred to as a characteristic of Okombahe's present 'disintegration'. The fine balance between the forces of mobility and confinement, between control and abandonment in the lives of Okombahe's people is inexorably linked to a narrative of place which speaks of coping with drought, of making the most of rare economic opportunities, of sacrificing for the sake of one's children's education as well as with alcoholism, domestic violence, theft and official corruption.

## Drought, Depression and Confinement: 1926 - 1939

It seems likely that the local response to the establishment of Otjimbingwe Reserve in 1925 was echoed in Okombahe as well: "For the residents of this new reserve, this period began on a high note. They now had a piece of land to which they had a relatively stable title" (Fuller 1993:43). The sentiments expressed by Daniel Kariko <sup>2</sup> in his petition for a Herero 'home', citing the Damara of Okombahe as being secure in their 'quasi-independence', were the reflection of a chink of optimism which flickered briefly during the hiatus of South African colonial consolidation. The onset of drought, coinciding a few years later with the global stock market crash and world recession would rapidly crush such optimism.

During the 1920s, Okombahe was located to the west of settler farms of the Omaruru District. Its continuity as a Damara 'reserve' during the first half of the 20th century undoubtedly had much to do with the fact that it was situated in an area of very low erratic rainfall, and was far from the main rail and road transport routes; the area was therefore unattractive to white commercial farmers but was close enough to these settler farms to serve as a convenient source of cheap labour. Drought in Okombahe was a frequent occurrence in both the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the social chaos and famine which had accompanied earlier droughts was modified and contained within the more stable colonial context. A series of below average rainfall years, punctuated by single, infrequent years of high rainfall gave way to the onset of severe drought in the late 1920s. The concurrence of drought, collapsing livestock prices and accumulating debt among white farmers had immediate repercussions for black farm workers (Sylvester 1996). As white farmers themselves began to migrate with the remnants of their herds, farm workers were laid off and their animals expelled from commercial farms; as options to lease grazing were curtailed, they had little choice but to return to Okombahe.

The population of the 'reserve' at the onset of drought in 1926 was 1,000 men, women and children. Approximately 30 percent of able bodied men were absent and engaged as farm workers or migrant labourers (Union of South Africa 1925). The reserve population was swollen by the return of

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<sup>2</sup> Previously the local Herero chief of Okombahe who was implicated in the brutal abduction of Damaras from the nearby Erongo mountains as bonded labourers. See Chapter 4.



farm workers and their immediate families - by 1929 the population had risen by 25 percent and cattle numbers rose by a third to 3,400, a peak which would not be exceeded again until 1945. As the drought progressed, herds were decimated and dispersed so that by 1933 only 15 percent of cattle and 30 percent of small stock remained alive in the reserve, while a significant proportion of herds survived on emergency grazing outwith the reserve. In desperation, people left Okombahe in search of grazing and work, leaving a core of women, the elderly and children behind. At the depth of the drought, the population had fallen back to below 1,000. The period of extreme aridity between 1926 and 1933, during which average rainfall was 50 percent of the long term average, was finally broken in 1934 by the highest rainfall season on record. Recovery was rapid and by 1937, Okombahe's human population had returned to pre-drought levels; within three years, sheep and goat (small stock) numbers had exceeded pre-drought levels and cattle herds attained two-thirds of their pre-drought size.

The period 1926 - 1933 constitutes the first in a series of drought episodes affecting Okombahe which were recorded in detail during the 20th century. The response of Okombahe's livestock farmers to multi-year drought, characterised by the events of 1926-1933 and recovery during the following decade, were to become the ever more predictable hall marks of pastoral resilience during the multi-year droughts of 1958-62 and 1980-84. In comparison with other reserves in southern Namibia, Okombahe seems to have survived remarkably well (Sylvester 1996), possibly because Okombahe's pastoralists still retained a degree of flexible mobility as their reserve had yet to be surrounded by settler commercial farms.

### **Enclosure and 'Prosperity': 1940 - 1958**

With the gradual revival of the global economy, the expansion of the karakul and dairy industry, resumption of demand from cattle export markets, coupled with improved climatic conditions, land settlement activities were renewed. During the 1930s, commercial farms to the south of Okombahe were surveyed and advertised for lease or sale and by 1940, all but the most western farms were occupied by white settlers. This process proceeded during the 1950s as the most marginal of the western farms were surveyed and allocated to desperate, poor whites who were given handsome incentives by way of state support (Kambatuku 1995). Damaraland was one

of the last areas to be settled by white farmers, partly for reasons of its setting on the periphery of established agriculturally productive areas, partly because of its marginal productive capacity and vulnerability to drought. Land settlement became the dominant instrument of colonial entrenchment and it served two purposes: by building on the policies of German land expropriation the South Africans sought to consolidate their control of the territory through the dispersal of loyal white colonists and secondly these colonists would be drawn from the growing numbers of landless Afrikaners who were becoming increasingly destitute through the rapid commercialization of South African agriculture. They represented a potential threat to the stability of the regime as a disaffected white lobby (Moorsom 1982:30).

The new colonists were often lured by fraudulent advertising showing lush farms and rivers in flood without mentioning that this occurrence was limited to one or two days of the year (Fuller 1993:27). Financial incentives to white settlers were irresistible: low interest loans for houses, agricultural infrastructure and livestock with generous terms for land acquisition meant that whites with little or no capital and virtually no proven experience were eligible. Up until the 1960's a probationary five year period fixed rents at 2 percent rising to 3.5 percent of the purchase price after an initial rent free period. If the option to purchase was exercised, the purchase price was payable over 30 years in the form of a low interest mortgage (Kozonguizi 1967:122).

An unforeseen consequence of the Land Settlement Programme was the boom in land prices. What began in Namibia as a continuation of the 'tradition' of land speculation in South Africa during the 19th century quickly came to be used as a political weapon of the settlers who continually sought to realign the borders between 'native reserves' and commercial farms. Fuller (1993:51-54) describes the machinations of settlers in areas adjacent to and comparable with those in Damaraland. White farmers who came to the Karibib district in the later years of the Land Settlement Programme often found themselves on 'unproductive and unsuitable' farms in the western end of the district. Knowing full well that they would be unable to establish profitable farms, even with generous support offered by the state, "many farmers constantly schemed and manoeuvred to sell, barter or trade their land for better farms in the centre of the country" (1993:30).

The distortions of land speculation were a side effect of the South African land settlement policy which was ultimately successful in establishing profitable white farming enterprises for the minority white population. That this profitability was almost wholly dependent on enormously generous state subsidies was crucial at times of crisis:

prolonged drought, depressed producer prices, epidemic stock disease - state aid was sufficiently generous to guarantee that the majority of ranchers survived intact, however severe their stock losses. Suspension of loan and interest payments, minimum product prices and direct price subsidies, and loans or grants for stock feed, transport, emergency boreholes and grazing, farm wages, even to supplement the farmers' cash income, all provided a comprehensive safety net to insure the settler farmer against economic disaster (Moorsom 1982:32).

Up until the 1960s, farm incomes, herd sizes and off-take rates all continued to rise assuring the wealth of the settler proprietors. In the meantime, the inhabitants of Okombahe were for the most part, left to their own devices. Okombahe's communal farmers had to survive without the state support which propped up the commercial farming sector. Increasingly, comparisons between the commercial /communal livestock sectors tended to reinforce assumptions that communal farming methods were inferior, wasteful and destructive, whereas the only real difference between the two farming systems resided in the granting or withholding of state subsidies and the grossly unfair distribution of land.

The outrageous racism which enforced and maintained the iniquitous reserve system gave rise to various forms of resistance, one of which Theo-Ben Gurirab experienced as a child and describes as a "human fortress of solidarity against apartheid and brutal white *baasskap*".<sup>3</sup> He suggests that the Okombahe of his youth (the 1940s and 1950s) was a place thriving with commerce: "cattle ranching, farming, gardening and business initiatives" and that it is different now - the oral testimonies of Okombahe's older generation confirm this vision of the past. However, rather than put the blame on today's youth, urban drift, dependency syndrome and the Bantustan system, I will argue that the pride and optimism generated in Okombahe up until it was incorporated into the expanded Damara Homeland in the 1970s was

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 3 for a summary of Theo-Ben Gurirab's remarks, made during his address at the opening of the photo exhibition in Windhoek, regarding the 'disaster' of Okombahe.



dependent on the complex contingencies of the climate, the economy and the development of apartheid.

To call the years spanning 1935 to 1970, 'prosperous', sounds ridiculous to anyone who cares to look dispassionately at the conditions of this small, crowded enclave of subsistence farmers and dependent migrant labourers. However, with hindsight, and relative to the 'moral' environment in Okombahe today, the past seems the embodiment of the 'good old days'. In the first place, the internal affairs of the 'reserve' were to a large extent under the political control of the 'reserve' residents and their elected officials. A certain amount of lassitude prevailed in the (limited) administration of internal affairs. Discipline involved the partnership of the community and its chosen leaders where disputes were handled and resolved at a local level. Access to limited natural resources such as grazing and river crop cultivation were in theory open to all. The headman and his councillors were responsible for resolving disputes and given a small proportion of the harvest by each gardener as tribute towards this conciliatory role.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the livestock and dairy industries became a regular and significant source of income for Okombahe's farmers during the 1940s and 1950s. As a result, significant capital surpluses accrued within the 'reserve' in the form of cash, livestock and general infrastructure in items such as milk separators, fencing, storage and transport systems, and marketing facilities. At that time nearly every family owned cattle and one in three of these sold cream on a regular basis. The growth in income during the 1940s and 1950s from the sale of cream and livestock, took place at a pace, and on a scale which is almost unimaginable today.<sup>5</sup> Economic development proceeded in the context of highly favourable climatic conditions - rainfall averages were almost double those of the previous 30 years - and a form of local, consensual 'democracy' which complimented the growth of the local social-economy in spite of the limitations inherent in the 'reserve' system.

As commercial land settlement reached saturation point, new groups of Damara speakers from the southern Kaokoveld and 'black spot' Reserves such as Augeikas, near Windhoek, were 'removed' to Okombahe. At last,

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<sup>4</sup> Such 'tribute' was paid to the head-man of Okombahe by river gardeners during the period of my fieldwork.

<sup>5</sup> Average weekly cream production was around 10 litres per farmer, derived from about 100 litres of milk. Today, in the absence of dairy markets, most milk production supports the suckler calves.

the colonial designs expressed by Palgrave in the 1870s<sup>6</sup> were accomplished and maintained with a minimum of effort. As the population of the reserve grew, both through natural increase and so-called 'immigration' (Köhler 1959:43), so too was the area of the reserve increased, first in 1947 and again in 1950, more than doubling the reserve's (barely) habitable area. As if to verify that 'nature abhors a vacuum' several waves of 'immigrants' were forced to settle within the expanded reserve around this time. Migrants came from the west of Kamanjab as commercial ranching displaced Damara pastoralists and these families and their herds settled around the Brandberg and Ugab. Several waves of immigrants from the Aueikas Reserve helped to swell the population of Okombahe village until their numbers were such that alternative settlements were 'made available' (See Maps # 2 & 4). These migrating families were harried from place to place by local Damara residents, shunted from Otjimbingwe to Okombahe and to settlements such as Jansen (where the population was swollen to over 200 in 1956). The majority of people forced to resettle eventually ended up in new parts of the reserve such as the 'communalised' commercial farm of Sorris-Sorris. The doubling of the population between 1939 and 1956 was the result of a steady annual growth rate of about 2.7 percent<sup>7</sup> combined with the influx of up to one thousand Damaras forced to move here from other areas in Namibia. It is likely that infant mortality rates were decreasing during this time due to the improved economy, and the introduction of rudimentary education and health programmes.

As the human population grew, so did the livestock numbers. Overall, LSUs doubled during this period, due mainly to a four-fold increase in cattle numbers after the introduction of a cream marketing scheme in 1947 (Köhler 1959). As cattle numbers grew, so also did cream production and livestock marketing. At its height in 1955, the dairy industry was supported by 227 individually owned, hand operated centrifugal separating machines in the reserve. This boom in the dairy and livestock industry locally, was largely dependent on post-world war export markets and high prices. Cattle off-take rates reached a sustainable high of 12.5 percent (Dahl & Hjort 1976) during this 'hey-day' of economic prosperity.

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<sup>6</sup> "The Government wants to bring all the Berg Damaras out of the mountains - if necessary they will be hunted out. They will be collected in places and made to stop there." (Palgrave 1991: 227).

<sup>7</sup> Deduced from Wagner's population statistics, 1951 (Köhler 1959: 53).

By the 1960s the surplus in marketable meat and dairy products was declining and the dependent nature of Namibia's economy in relation to that of South Africa was more than apparent (Gurirab 1988:322). South Africa controlled the entire market for live cattle and processed meat and dairy products, using Namibia as a production reserve to fill the gaps in supply and demand within the South African economy. This exploitative control over the Namibian market (Lau & Reiner 1993:2) coupled with the severe four year drought commencing in 1958 spelt doom for Okombahe's short-lived prosperity.

Okombahe's expanding garden cultivation was also severely affected by the drought. River gardens are highly susceptible to catchment rainfall variation, but because crops are normally planted after the rainy season, this form of agriculture is less risk-prone than the more common rainfed crop planting practised in other parts of Namibia. Even during the relatively high rainfall of the 1950s, for several years river-bed gardens were fallow due to poor flooding in the previous season. In good years more than 20 hectares <sup>8</sup> of river-bed were cultivated with harvests of up to 20 tons of wheat (Köhler 1959). Additionally, irrigated plots on the banks of the river provided vegetables, fruit and tobacco. In many ways, the inhabitants of Okombahe had never had it so good.

Almost 100 years after its establishment, the village and its surrounding farm-posts had become a self-sustaining centre of rural peasant production. A combination of factors, including favourable climatic conditions, *laissez-faire* internal political control, highly developed marketing networks and improving opportunities for education and health, contributed to this positive advance in Okombahe's fortunes. This was an amplified and prolonged episode of development which had parallels in the settlement's early history. However, political, economic and demographic trends now meant that 'traditional' responses to drought were no longer possible; the process of social reproduction was henceforth intensified within the village as it became a magnet for the population exodus from surrounding rural farm settlements.

The late 1950s and early 1960s were a watershed for Okombahe's social economy. Around this time, the RSA began a process of imposing apartheid leading to the full administrative integration of Namibia into the RSA:

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<sup>8</sup> Calculated from aerial photos made in 1958.



This process required a deconstruction of the integrated colonial SWA Administration, which was, at the time, based on a racial division between settler and native but not then on apartheid principles of 'ethnic' divisions and fragmentation. [. . .] it appears that the agricultural effect of this step was an almost immediate decline in dairying, crop cultivation and individual or co-operative enterprise in the reserves [. . .] (Lau & Reiner 1993: 11).

Farmers' ability to cope with drought was severely curtailed by ever tightening restrictions on migration, due to rigorous pass-laws and the appropriation of surrounding grazing land by white settlers. While the decline in livestock numbers within the reserve was not as dramatic as during the 1926-1933 drought, this could be accounted for by the ability of Damara pastoralists to migrate in earlier times. Furthermore, the recovery in livestock numbers after the drought was more gradual than previously due to this same reason. Many elderly Damara farmers remember this as a time when they lost all of their cattle to drought; recovery during the 1960s was no longer fuelled by market expansion. Instead, the development of a 'homeland' bureaucratic infrastructure led to a new economic dynamism based on state and leadership patronage. The SWA Administration took over the running of the reserve, and through the implementations of the instrument of Grand Apartheid, the Odendaal Report, implemented its recommendations which effectively removed all local decision making regarding development, from the inhabitants of Okombahe. The South West Africa Act of 1969 incorporated Namibia into the RSA as a fifth province and created 'homelands' based on ethnic criteria.

### **The Master Confidence Trick: Implementing Odendaal <sup>9</sup>**

Two hundred and twenty three farms in Damaraland, most of them only surveyed and settled since the 1930s, were bought from their white owners at land values which included generous allowances for improvements. These farms varied in size from 4,000 to 25,000 hectares, averaging about 8,500 hectares (Odendaal Report 1964:91-3). Typically these had been extensive cattle and small-stock enterprises dependent almost entirely on black labour: the arid environment and the sparse grazing meant that stock

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<sup>9</sup> This and the following section are slightly altered extracts from *Tinkering with Chaos* (Rohde 1994).

had continually to be distributed and moved over considerable distances between camps, water points and enclosures. Contract labour from the northern areas competed to bring low wages even lower for the permanent local workers. Today this low wage level is still reflected in the pay of farm workers both within and outside the communal areas, often averaging less than R100 (£17) per month.

The Odendaal farms, comprising an area of nearly two million hectares, were amalgamated with the existing reserves (Okombahe, Fransfontein, Sesfontein) and state land, thereby expanding the size of the reserve by a factor of five (Odendaal Report 1964:93; Wellington 1967:385). The Odendaal Report suggests that the total Damara population was in the order of 44,000 in 1963 and was scattered over the whole of southern Namibia, employed as labourers on farms, in mines and the urban centres. The Report suggests that moving this entire population to Damaraland would provide 108 hectares *per capita*. Given that as little as one third of this area is utilizable from a sedentary farm based system, this leaves about 250 hectares per family where previously 8,500 hectares were necessary to sustain the white settler. That the Commission's recommendations were ultimately only partly implemented is evident from the fact that by 1981, out of a total SWA Damara population of 76,000 only 24,000 were residents of Damaraland (NEPRU 1992). The remaining Damara population are residing in Katutura township in Windhoek or living in Nama or white owned land as labourers (Barnard 1992:213).

While the implementation of the plan was to be provided with funds to finance the establishment of homelands as self-governing areas, the prevailing issue taken up at the World Court regarding South Africa's legal jurisdiction over SWA retarded immediate implementation. The government would however, 'purchase white farms in areas designated as intended non-white homelands *if and when* the White farmers wanted to sell, so that farmers should not suffer as a result of the uncertainty created by the report" (Cockram 1976:310-12; italics added). It took until 1978 to hold the first Bantustan elections in Damaraland. The provisions for the creation of a Damara Legislative Assembly had been set out in the Report and were based on notions of traditional leadership,

or the present functioning rulers, namely the appointed chief or his deputy, the three headmen from Okombahe, Fransfontein and Sesfontein and the seven councillors of Okombahe, together with as

many elected members of the existing governing body shall determine: *Provided that such elected members shall not constitute more than 40% of the Legislative Council* (Odendaal Report 1964:93; italics added).

The Council would take over the functions of the existing Department of Bantu Affairs apart from defence, security, foreign affairs and utilities, and all legislation be subject to the approval of the President of the RSA. Local government institutions would be created under this Council. Citizenship was to be established which excluded all other population groups apart from those resident in the old reserve areas. And Welwitschia (Khorixas) would be the administrative seat of the Regional government.

The 'communalization' of the white settler's commercial farms to form an expanded Damaraland could hardly have come at a more opportune time as rainfall during the 1960s and 70s reached an all time sustained high. In the wake of the white settlers departure, the veld was undergrazed for several years and seemed to hold out the (illusory) promise that the abandoned white farms would offer 'an extremely valuable asset with their existing buildings, watering points and fencing' with "great opportunities for increasing the livestock population. There is no doubt that, if the Damara could make the best use of [these] advantages, they would be assured of a good livelihood" (Odendaal Report 1963: 296-7).

For many Damara farmers, including inhabitants of Okombahe, this opportunity was highly attractive, especially given the severe lack of economic and political freedom within the country as a whole. This communal expansion provided at least some scope for renewed subsistence livestock farming after the demise of the dairy industry in the early 1960s. It also provided some relief to the heavily stocked reserves such as Okombahe which nevertheless, had recovered from the 1958-62 drought to an all time high stocking rate by 1979. Unfortunately, the illusion of this 'golden opportunity' for Damara independence and economic advancement was soon to be shattered. With the onset of the severe, multi-year drought in 1979 and 1980, a return to a significantly low long-term average rainfall pattern since that time has resulted in the general impoverishment of Damaraland's population and the growth of rural ghettos such as Okombahe, Uis, Spitzkoppe and Khorixas.



## Land Tenure in Practice

The flexibility inherent in early pastoral systems was undermined by colonialism; the institution of 'tribal leadership' as the instrument of 'indirect rule', acted as the locus of control over land tenure in the Okombahe Reserve and later Damaraland: it was adapted by Damaras as a *useful* parody of pre-colonial herding and subsistence practices. The Native Affairs Boards and Native Trusts which were set up to administer the internal affairs of the 'reserves', were in effect institutions designed to ensure that the economic development of the reserve was in line with the interests of white farmers. Throughout the colonial period underfunding and overcrowding forced many reserve residents into the wage sector, and the little agricultural development which was initiated by the state was tightly controlled, and support services were minimal. Black agriculture in many of the 'native reserves' had effectively been reduced to a residual, not a subsistence sector by the early 1960's. (Adams & Werner 1990:36-37)

Colonial land dispossession is a well documented aspect of Namibian history; much less is known about indigenous adaptations to dispossession, the creation of 'native reserves', and 'Bantustans'. In Western Namibia, the reserves of Okombahe, Fransfontein and Otjohorongo functioned as labour reserves for the surrounding settler farming community. While the internal political structures of these reserves varied in detail, they operated on a similar basis. Okombahe, for instance, came under the overall control of a white native commissioner, but the day to day running of affairs fell to a 'reserve board' comprising the 'paramount head', two headmen and councillors from each area of the reserve (Köhler, 1959). The Odendaal Commission proposed to transfer the ownership and control of the Reserves from the South African Native Trust to the Legislative Assemblies of the proposed self-governing homelands. The basic structure of 'tribal leadership' would later be expanded within the new homeland of the Damaras: both instances can be viewed as an expedient indigenous response to colonial pressure, insofar as Damara social practice operates within a less stratified social structure and is less reliant on leadership hierarchies than neighbouring Nama, Herero and Europeans. The consensual nature of the election of headmen and councillors operated in a loose structure which was devolved to the 'grass-roots' level where local community interests were

represented and a common sense approach to the resolution of disputes was the norm.

Damara farmers began moving into the new 'homeland' during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the absence of any clear legislative control. During the early years of resettlement, permits were issued by white commissioners stationed in Welwitschia (Khorixas), under the existing 'pass-laws' which allowed Damaras access to farms on an *ad hoc* basis. With the abolition of the pass-law legislation in 1976 Damaras willingly 'immigrated' or were forcibly resettled here from various parts of the country; what little planning existed was based on trying to disperse the population as evenly as possible by restricting the numbers of farmers at each settlement according to a notional 'carrying capacity'. There was no 'traditional' land allocation system in place, unlike most other communal areas of Namibia. It took until 1978 to set up a 'second tier authority' in Damaraland and only in 1985 did the Damara Council finally codify the structure of a 'tribal authority' which obsessed the South African government.<sup>10</sup>

The Damara Council itself would largely replicate the old reserve board, albeit on a much larger scale. A form of 'traditional leadership' was created through the establishment of twelve wards, each with ward heads and councillors. This would legitimate the positions of the tribal authority by facilitating the flow of patronage in the form of salaries and disbursements to the newly created wards. Ward leaders would have a certain degree of independence in exercising local powers. Although the various headmen and councillors were consulted, e.g. on rights of residence and disputes over access to land, these powers were not strictly speaking 'legal'. But the symbolic function of these positions of authority should not be underestimated: within the impoverished economy of Damaraland, networks of patronage associated with administratively legitimized leaders and their mediation in issues of access to the few resources available, was highly significant within the homeland system.

During the 1980s, as the resettlement of Damaras from elsewhere in Namibia continued, the rights to land and grazing continued on a usufruct basis which was, in theory, regulated by the tribal leaders through the administrative framework of agricultural extension officers working within the Damara Council's Department of Agriculture in Khorixas. On the whole,

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<sup>10</sup> See Fuller (1993) and Rohde (1994) for details regarding the creation of a Damara 'tribal authority' with the passing of Ordinance No. 2 by the Damara legislative Council in 1986.

rights of access to land were negotiated on an informal basis, and disputes were rarely taken above the level of the ward leadership. Furthermore, it was common practice for headmen to consult their councillors and community before granting or denying rights of residence to an incomer. Incomers gravitated towards farm settlements where relatives already stayed, thereby minimising social resistance to the sharing of water and grazing. Refusal of applicants was uncommon, membership of a specific - largely ethnically defined - community, conveyed automatic rights to land (Fuller 1993:96). In cases where disputes developed over access to grazing and water, arbitration would in the first instance be undertaken by councillors, then headmen and finally, if consensus could not be reached, through the Damara Council in consultation with agricultural extension workers. Women held the same land tenure rights and participated in the same process of arbitration as men.

These land tenure practices went hand in hand with the 'communalization' of Damaraland during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and took place within the context of one of the most severe droughts to affect western Namibia during the 20th century. As with previous droughts, 'traditional' coping strategies involving migration and dispersal were employed. These proved to be largely futile given the length and severity of the drought. Livestock herds were reduced by 80 percent in the Damaraland region. In areas such as Okombahe, stocking densities were literally decimated to 10 percent of pre-drought levels. Out-migration from drought stricken farm settlements fuelled the population growth of this already swollen rural settlement, as individuals and families who had recently become impoverished gravitated to the village as a refuge of last resort. A contemporary variant of the forces of socio-economic marginalisation which served to establish Okombahe during the 19th century were repeated within the context of this enlarged homeland. The expansion of the communal area would to some extent mitigate the excesses of drought, but internally, the processes of impoverishment and destitution transformed the once 'prosperous' settlement of Okombahe into a rural ghetto.

At independence, the laws which constituted the so-called 'second tier authorities' were repealed and their powers removed. All property under the control of the Damara Authority reverted to the government of Namibia. Hence, communal land along with water installations and most permanent infrastructure came under the control of the central government.



Furthermore, unlike most of Namibia's other communal areas, where rights to resources are governed by customary law and tradition, such rules were not recognised in Damaraland.<sup>11</sup> It would seem that the Damaras, in spite of their evident success in conforming to colonial stereotypes of 'tribalism', continue to be perceived as a dysfunctional 'non-tribe'.

Communal resources are theoretically open and accessible to all communal residents, although some vestiges of resource allocation procedures based on ward leadership survive into the present. Headmen and councillors have lost much of their 'official' status, yet in the absence of anything to replace their power, they retain a strong advisory role in the matter of land allocation and land disputes. Furthermore, agricultural extension officers have also retained the strong mediating role in conflicts over resource utilisation which was one of their functions within the second tier government. The general procedures for land allocation which were operative before independence continue to have some relevance today. However, during the drought of 1991-2, this system was unable to regulate widespread migration, although it continued to have a mediating influence on violent conflict. In 1994, poor rainfall affected northern Damaraland and once again large movements of people and livestock put pressure on a fragile system of control. To make matters worse, the Ministry of Lands, Resettlement and Rehabilitation, based in Windhoek, confused the issue by declaring its authority to settle local land disputes but in practice it lacked the capacity to do so.

The collapse of the Damara 'homeland' administrative structure resulted in an erosion of a highly effective and appropriate system of land rights and resource control. However, land tenure practice has not degenerated into a 'free-for-all' open access regime; rights of access and rights of exclusion continue to be flexible, permeable and subject to constant revision. The result is a pattern of social interaction arising from necessity, shrewd opportunism, hard negotiation and a large measure of tolerance between farmers. This 'do-it-yourself' system has its roots in Damara social order and the exigencies of environmental constraints. It works because it

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<sup>11</sup> The traditions and social organisation of the Damaras have never been acknowledged by government. With regard to the powers of traditional leaders in customary law, the *Report of the Technical Committee on Commercial Land* states that: 'No specific position could be determined. No reported or unreported cases which dealt with the land issue in these areas (Namaland, Damaraland and Kaokoland) could be found' (Republic of Namibia 1992:110).

'makes sense'. This sense can be discerned in the extreme situation arising out of prolonged drought.

### **Coping with Drought: Mobility and Conflict**

Between 1978 and 1994 rainfall in Damaraland fell on average twenty-five to thirty percent below the long term yearly mean. In the northern area, only two out of the last eighteen years have had rainfall above the long term average. In the dryer south, only four out of the last fifteen years have had above average precipitation. The severe drought of the early 1980s was the result of four successive years of less than fifty percent average rainfall. More recently, two less severe drought events occurred. During 1991-3 the whole of western Namibia suffered from two successive low rainfall years coming in the wake of a long and gradual recovery to pre-1978 rainfall averages. The 1993-4 rainy season brought less than thirty percent of average rainfall to northern and eastern areas of Damaraland, while southern regions received fifty percent above the average.

The pattern of stock deaths from a prolonged drought becomes acute in the second and subsequent years. In 1980, stock levels in Damaraland were roughly comparable to levels in 1991; however subsequent years of little or no rain between 1981 and 1983 saw the reductions of ninety percent of cattle, sixty-five percent of sheep and fifty percent of goats during the second year of drought.<sup>12</sup> Emergency grazing in the commercial areas was arranged through the Damara Authority, and subsidised transport for some stock enabled farmers to rebuild herds when the drought finally broke in 1984. The Damara Council also purchased several commercial farms adjacent to Damaraland and resettled communal farmers there. This strategy of drought relief was not considered during the 1991-2 drought and most farmers resorted to migration and dispersal of stock as the only viable coping strategy, one which has a continuous history in Damara livestock subsistence farming from colonial times up to the present. De-stocking of cattle through auctions in 1992 was reflected in an increase of sales by about forty percent over the previous year, but taken as a whole represented a reduction in the total herd of less than twenty percent (Næraa *et al* 1992:8).

Livestock numbers have mirrored the rainfall pattern: the peak of 90,000 LSU in 1979 crashed to twenty percent of that total in 1982 taking ten years

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix # 7 for details.

to recover to 91,000 LSU in 1993. In spite of fifteen years of poor rainfall, the ability to rebuild decimated herds is a testament to the resilience of the environment as well as to the determination of communal farmers. If, as many observers<sup>13</sup> have predicted, the environment of Damaraland is degraded and on the verge of collapse (whatever that means) then the evidence for such an eventuality is certainly not born out of an analysis of the lands' continuing productive capacity. Several factors are responsible for this dramatic herd recovery: transport assistance for emergency grazing, fodder subsidy but most importantly, herd mobility within the communal area of former Damaraland.

The rains in the summer season of 1991- 92 failed almost totally in many parts of Damaraland. By May 1992, Agricultural extension officers in the western and southern farms were reporting acute stress as grazing disappeared, water sources became unreliable or brackish, and livestock began to die. The pressure of livestock being moved into slightly more advantageous adjacent farms is reflected in drought report comments and statistics which show that for all but a few farmers with access to trees, bushes and reeds growing in the Ugab, Huab and Omaruru River beds, a massive shift of livestock was underway. Some of the most marginal farms had already been completely abandoned. The most seriously affected areas were in the western fringe of Odendaal farms, stretching from Bergsig in the north down to Sorris Sorris, and in the whole of the Okombahe, Uis and Spitzkoppe wards to the south. The general pattern of movement was towards the east and north, and consequently farmers in these areas came under increased pressure from an influx of livestock.

Cattle, being the most vulnerable, were the first to be moved to alternative grazing often on adjacent farms, but also further afield as farmers amalgamated their herds under the management of family members who set out on migration. In many instances, only a nucleus of small stock remained on these vacated farms which were often left under the management of elderly people. Comments from the May 1992 farm reports in the Bergsig ward are typical of agricultural extension officer's responses throughout:

Totally dry. 80% of animals transferred; Don't consider any more applicants: Please stop adding livestock; Totally dry, livestock must be transferred; Situation going from bad to worse.

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<sup>13</sup> Government officials, nature conservators, agricultural extension officers: see Chapters 7 & 8 for more details.

The predicament in the southern wards was even worse as the lack of water and grazing affected this whole region: most farmers wanted to move but had nowhere to go. Already stock deaths due to drought were ten percent for cattle, fifteen percent for goats and twenty percent for sheep.

By June 1992, twenty percent of farmers in the Odendaal farms to the south of Okombahe, had already moved their livestock to marginally better grazing areas within the district. Migration to abandoned farm posts or settlements within walking distance of ephemeral rivers generally consisted of short treks of between thirty and sixty kilometres to the north and east. For farmers who could afford to do so, the transportation of water to undergrazed veld was a preferred option. Other farmers undertook the labour intensive herding of stock up to ten kilometres to river springs or the to village of Okombahe itself.

A variety of drought coping strategies were employed by rural households during 1992: some of the poorest families used their fodder subsidy to buy yellow maize which was then ground and cooked for human consumption; other farmers were 'sitting it out' by supplementing fodder rations with capital raised by selling stock. Generally people were on the move, migrating short distances to posts within reach of wooded river beds and natural springs, or entrusting stock to herders migrating further towards north-east Damaraland or else leaving Damaraland altogether by way of the verges of national highways within the commercial areas. One group of farmers in the Erongo area were able to arrange grazing rights along the Windhoek - Swakopmund rail line.

Access to water and grazing within Damaraland were negotiated on an *ad hoc* basis with few if any strict rules governing the resolution of inevitable conflicts of interest. In cases where the fences of wealthier farmers had been cut, or where incursions into grazing areas were recurring against the express wishes of the farm occupier, overt violence was rare. While the notion of restricting rights to grazing was commonly expressed by those who had conserved some grazing for their de-stocked herds, in practice, some form of accommodation was the norm.

When the 1991-3 drought ended the population of the Okombahe's satellite farm settlements within the old 'reserve' and the Odendaal farms to the south, returned to previous levels. However, the population of Okombahe itself continued to expand as a result of the impoverishment of



livestock farmers and their families due to the effects of droughts since the 1960s. The village consisted of 360 people in 1956. By 1970 the population rose to 1218 (Gordon 1972) and remained stable during the next decade. A population surge occurred again in the wake of the 1980-84 drought and according to the 1991 census there were 350 households in the village of Okombahe and a total population of 1,822. This population influx has continued as a result of drought during the 1990s.

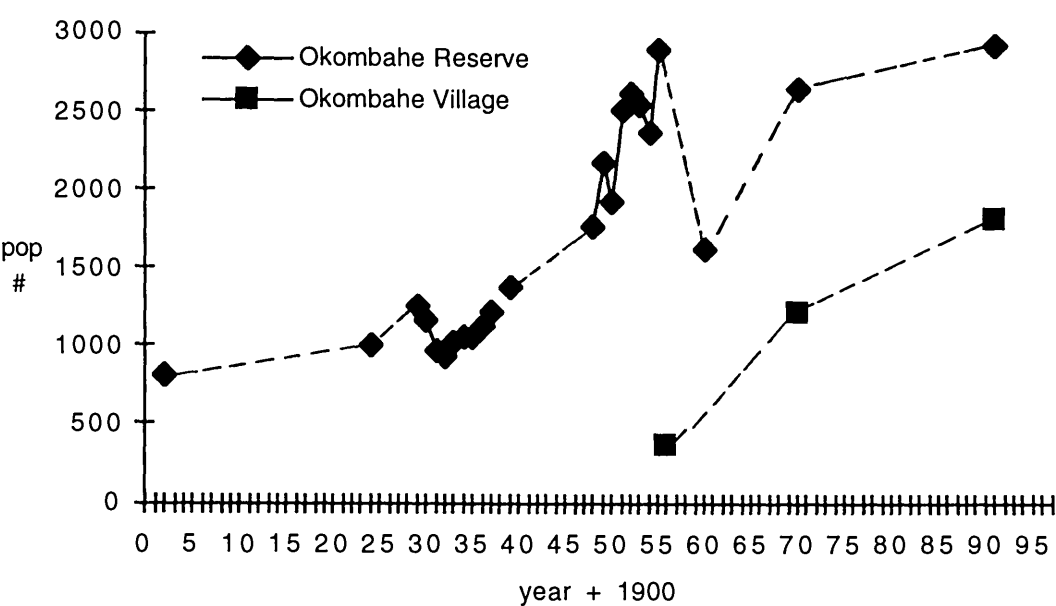


Fig. 1: Population of Okombahe Reserve and Village. Previous to 1947, the Reserve covered 1,700 square kilometres; after 1950 population figures relate to the expanded area of 4,200 square kilometres which formed the ward boundaries of Okombahe and Uis after 1970.

The development of social services ameliorated some of the worst effects of this poverty. Employment in the form of food-for-work, gardening projects and food relief for the elderly and most vulnerable during the 1991-2 drought contributed to Okombahe's expansion in much the same way as the development of Okombahe as a ward centre had during the previous three decades. It reiterates a pattern which is discernible throughout Okombahe's history and its establishment as a permanent settlement during the late 19th century.

During the first six months of 1994, large numbers of livestock and people from the drought affected northern and eastern parts of Damaraland moved south to the abundant grazing around Brandberg and the Ugab River. For the most part, this took place spontaneously as individual

farmers and their families sought ways of surviving with their herds of cattle, goats and sheep. It happened on a scale which precluded regulation by government officials, agricultural extension officers and traditional leaders. The loose system of resource control which grew out of the creation of the Damara homeland during the 1970s and 1980s has become weakened as a result of the erosion of traditional leaders' authority and the centralisation of government in Windhoek. The recently established Welwitschia Agricultural Union facilitated meetings between the various wards affected by wide-spread migration in an effort to resolve conflicts over resource utilization. Meanwhile, the government had approved a transport subsidy for livestock owners wishing to move to emergency grazing, thus encouraging a further influx into the Ugab area.

One is tempted to see all this as chaos, a desperate scramble for scarce resources. And yet something almost intangible seems to order this fluid process. This is evident in the fact that farmers are able to accommodate substantial influxes of livestock from drought affected areas with a minimum of conflict and in the absence of strict regulation of pastoral resources. Damaraland might be conceived of as one large farm, supporting over 33,000 people within its borders: the equivalent area of commercial farmland in Outjo or Omaruru supports only a fraction of this human population and produces less per hectare in spite of its higher agricultural potential.<sup>14</sup> However, there are limits to what this 'farm' can sustain - communal pastoralists are expressing dissatisfaction with government policy in response to growing social, economic, political and environmental constraints.

Conflicts arising over the uncontrolled influx of Herero speaking pastoralists into the northern areas is the result of not only increasing population pressure, but also poorly defined rights of access and control to communal resources. Damara speakers lack the political organisation which would enable them to move into areas 'traditionally' occupied by Herero

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<sup>14</sup> The old administrative district of Outjo contains some 330 commercial farms and its utilizable farming area is roughly equivalent in size to that of Damaraland which borders Outjo to the west (commercial farms in Outjo District total 24,000 square kilometres; only 46% or approximately 19,500 square kilometres of Damaraland is suitable to livestock farming). Outjo District receives more than twice the average annual rainfall as Damaraland and yet sustains less livestock per hectare. In 1993 stocking rates in Outjo equalled 4.9 LSUs per square kilometre while Damaraland sustained 5 LSUs per square kilometre. (Statistics derived from the Department of Agriculture, Veterinary Services Livestock Census 1993.)

pastoralists: hence they feel squeezed by their own increasing population as well as by incursions of 'outsiders'.

The process of defining boundaries and rights to communal resources by farmers in Damaraland exhibits a certain conceptual and practical flexibility which has its counterpart in other areas of communal life such as kinship, settlement patterns, economic strategies and politics. These sociological constructs are lived as a total, whole and unbounded environment in which expedience and the practicalities of survival are the grounds of improvised action, rather than as rule-bound domains of 'social life'.

## Conclusion

This brief romp through the narrative of Okombahe's and Damaraland's past is set within a dialectic of social worlds overdetermined by colonialism. The title of this chapter, "Zones of control or of abandonment", is an allusion to this often repeated encounter, where the creation of Okombahe as a cultural, political and social locus owes much of its 'character' to the imposition of control by outside forces and the internal sense of abandonment which epitomises Okombahe's social history.

The comparison between the communal experience and the commercial culture of appropriation and exploitation is unavoidable; one could not exist without the other. The dialectics of control/abandonment continue to operate on many levels in the present, and the comparison between these reified interconnected worlds persists within an essentially unchanged colonial discourse of development and democracy grounded in persistent inequality. The trope of social and economic 'transformation' can only be said to reflect reality in Damaraland insofar as the gradual incorporation of a marginalised rural population into the global economy has occurred within this colonial context. A Damara communal history is embodied in concepts of property, power and social relations; these remain dependent on the exigencies of survival in a marginal economic and physical environment: the coping strategies of individuals, families and communities faced with recurrent droughts and inequality within the country's stunted capitalist economy are a graphic illustration of this. This overview of the political, economic and social history of Okombahe and its incorporation into a larger

Damara homeland, is a broad reflection of processes which continue to affect the lives of people living within and around Okombahe today.

As will become evident in the following chapter, the hiatus in state control occasioned by independence, has tended to exaggerate practices which arise as a response to 'abandonment', creating a sub-text to narratives of place and personal experience. By examining the detail of personal lives in relation to mobility, herd building, kinship and notions of property, we might begin to imagine the performative and instrumental functionality of 'common sense' from the vantage point of the human actors who engage, reproduce, distort and subvert the political system within this shifting arena of dialectical encounters. Historical narrative itself is a dialectical exchange between the de-centred and the subjective - therefore, an attempt will be made to link the subjective narratives of the Okombahe photographer's self-portraits in the context of this chapter's broad overview of the past.

Finally, in relation to the "numbing amnesia" which afflicts so many policy makers and development planners, it is necessary to reiterate this inglorious past, so that the present can be seen to comprise a momentous continuum rather than as the aberrant dislocation in which it is so often conceived. The irony of experts preaching technical knowledge to communal farmers is not lost on the 'peasants' concerned. Commercial ranching practice continues to dominate development paradigms, policy, research and technical support to Namibian farmers. White settlers only survived as commercial ranchers in this arid environment of western Namibia for a few decades with generous assistance from the state, during a period of exceptionally high average rainfall: it is time that so-called experts and advisors acknowledged the fact that they have little to teach and much to learn from the generations of experience embodied in the practices of the communal farmers of former Damaraland.



## CHAPTER 6

### OF EXCLUSIVENESS AND SHARING

**In an unpredictable environment, certain critical ambiguities as to who owns what and can go where provide a degree of fluidity which suits every one's purpose.**

**Roy Behnke (1994:15)**

This chapter concludes my historical overview of Okombahe by focusing on the dynamics of contemporary life in the village and some the smaller farm settlements which surround it. The ongoing effects of environmental, social, economic and political circumstances of the past, are evident in the lives of communal farmers today: what might otherwise remain obscure and isolated in trying to understand the present is illuminated by an historical imagination rooted to the local and the specific. This chapter appeals to the past as a means of understanding the present by grounding historical narrative in a micro-level analysis of wider processes and events which comprise the subject matter of the previous two chapters. "What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps" (Said 1993:1).

The portrayal of Okombahe's 'decline' is all too often consistent with the kinds of assumptions and the level of analysis which were articulated by Theo-Ben Gurirab in his opening speech at the photographic exhibition (Chapter 3). If it is true to say that "Okombahe is today a community which is sleeping through many exciting things which are taking place in Namibia - it is being by-passed by opportunities and benefits of independence", then it is also necessary to point out that the reasons for this are rooted in historically contingent processes which implicate far more than the brief experience of Bantustan policies, a decline in agricultural production due to the recent upstream damming of the Omaruru River and the flight of Okombahe's youth to urban centres. The metaphor of 'nature, cattle thieves and various other mid-night robbers' alludes to a complex nexus of individual responses to political, environmental and economic circumstances which can be seen to have continuity, regardless of the uncertainties which surround the construction of the past. By looking more

closely at the lives of individuals and their response to drought; by examining the means whereby social networks are maintained, contested and negotiated; by uncovering the cultural behaviour associated with concepts of property and the meaning of place; by tracing the patterns of individuals and families as they move across this marginal, arid landscape, it is possible to reach a better understanding of how the past is continuous with the present.

### **The Making of a Rural Ghetto**

During the last forty years the population of Okombahe village has grown five-fold from 360 to almost 2,000 people. In the 1950s it was linked to the outside world by poorly maintained narrow dirt tracks connecting it to the nearest towns and the outside world; the village is situated midway between Omaruru to the east, Uis mine to the west and Usakos to the south, all of which are approximately sixty kilometres distant. To reach any one of these towns by donkey cart, the predominant mode of transport at the time, took one and a half days. Two churches (one housing the school) a clinic, two shops, a cafe and the house of the resident Welfare Officer comprised the main infrastructure of the village. Okombahe's relative isolation gave it a feeling of self-sufficiency and the village acted as a small rural centre for the widely dispersed farming community which surrounded it.

The earliest detailed census was made in 1957 (Köhler 1959). At that time, women only slightly outnumbered men in the reserve, but in Okombahe itself, women comprised 62 percent of the adult population. The reasons for this were probably similar to those obtaining today: women reside in the village and look after their school children, men tend to live in farm homesteads outside of Okombahe or migrate to the region's urban centres in search of work. During the 1950s, many men in the reserve were employed and lived at local mining operations and up to 30 percent of young men in their twenties left the reserve as migrant labourers. A seemingly disproportionate number of elderly people inhabited the reserve during this time, contrary to the commonly held assumption that this skewing of the population is only a recent phenomenon; in fact it was more prevalent in the past.

In 1957, only thirty percent of school aged children attended Okombahe's primary school. A few children would have boarded at church

schools in the region's larger towns such as the RC Mission school in Usakos. but a large proportion were logistically unable to attend school from a dispersed rural environment coupled with the expense of boarding away from home. Only one in five pupils boarded in Okombahe. Having come from distant parts of the reserve, they were reliant on relatives or friends in the village for lodgings. It is interesting to note that girls made up fifty-eight percent of the school population at this time.

This brief demographic description of Okombahe raises several issues regarding change and continuity in Okombahe's social economy. During the 1950s, the reserve population was dispersed in rural settlements where a combination of wage labour and livestock production formed the core of the subsistence economy. The village itself was like an expanded farm settlement and the predominance of women in the village might be attributed to the educational and social opportunities it offered. The fact that so many girls attended school is a strong indication of the equality of gender relations in Damara society generally. The relative affluence afforded by a long period of high rainfall, coupled with political stability and the amenities of educational and health services helped to bring about a demographic shift similar to that experienced by many rural populations throughout the developing world as the effects of an expanding global economy brought economic and social benefits (such as education and health care) as well as fragmentation and peripheralization. The steep curve of the population pyramid at the beginning of this period of change was distorted by the high proportion of elderly people who had either returned here or 'retired' from other parts of Namibia (the proportion of old people was far higher then than it is now); and labour migration of young adults (mainly young men, but women between the ages of 25 and 35 were also involved).

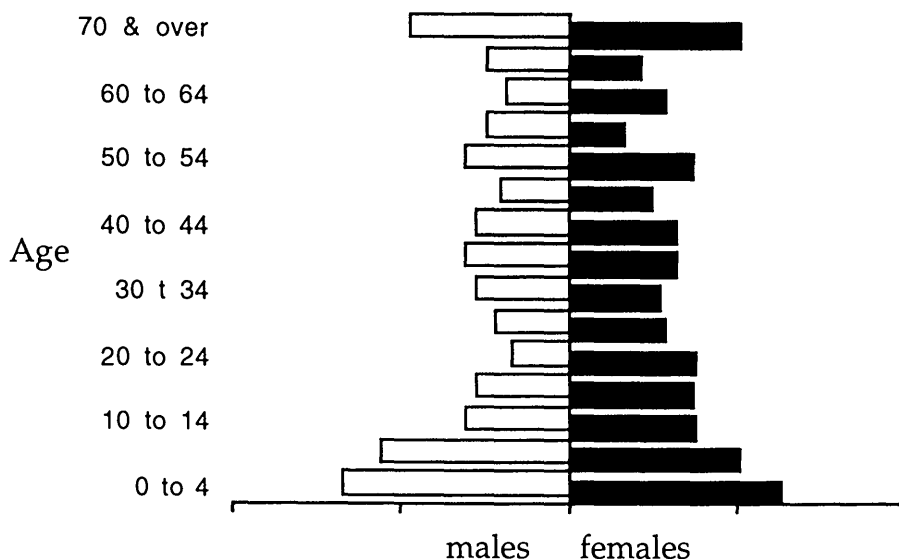


Fig. 2: Population of Okombahe in age groups according to sex as a percentage of total, 1951 (Köhler 1959).

During the next forty years a combination of higher fertility rates and decreased child mortality almost certainly accounts for the classic pyramid shape of demographic transition. Apart from the expansion of education and health provisions to Okombahe, improvements in communications, an expanding economy and the geographical expansion of the reserve itself created an enhanced social infrastructure which provided conditions which are typically associated with rapid population growth.

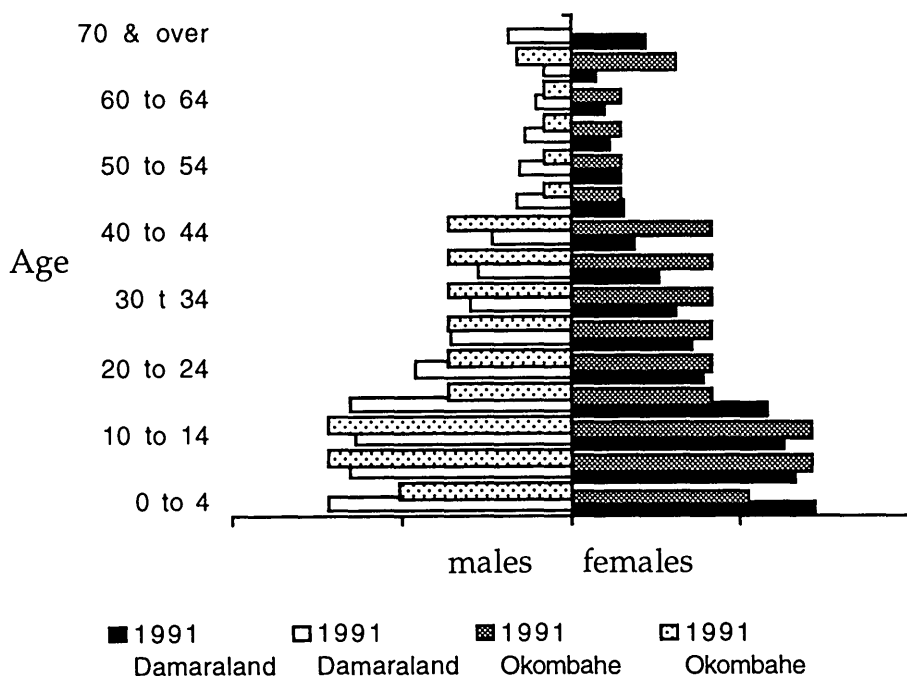


Fig. 3: Population of Okombahe in age groups according to sex as a percentage of total (1991). Derived from *National population and housing census, 1991* (1993; 1994).



In 1996, the village supported two school hostels, one of approximately 30 primary school children housed by the Lutheran Church and the other at Diabasen Junior Secondary School of about 150 teenagers, skewing the population in favour of children. The number of school age children, as a proportion of the population in Okombahe, was nearly 25 percent higher than the national average.<sup>1</sup>

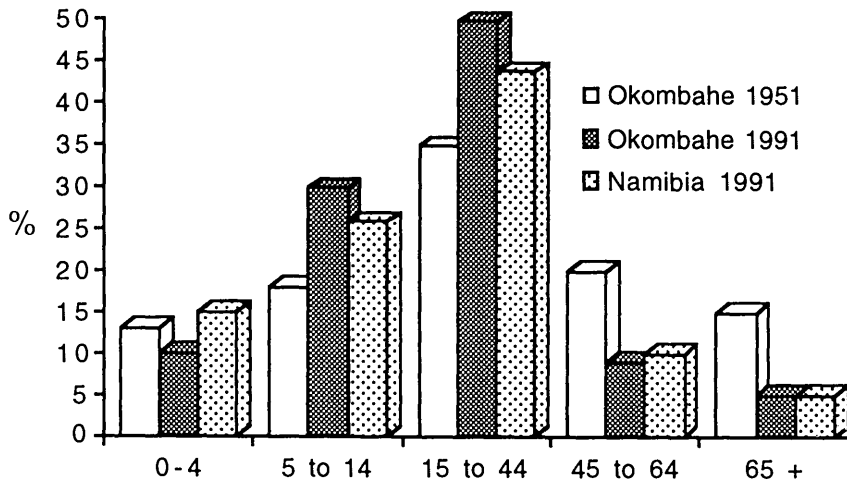


Fig. 4: Population of Okombahe 1951, 1991 & Namibia 1991 in age groups as a percentage of total. Derived from Köhler (1959) and *National population and housing census, 1991* (1993; 1994).

Many families were split between outlying farms and village households resulting in a preponderance of women staying in the village looking after school children, while husbands and grandparents were over-represented in the rural farm population along with children under 5 years old. There were 8 percent more women than men in the village, but the exact opposite obtained in outlying rural areas so that the proportion of adult men and women was balanced when calculated across the whole of southern Damaraland. There were nearly twice as many pensioners living outside Okombahe as within the village itself and nearly 50% more children under 5 years old living in these outlying rural farms and villages than in Okombahe. These statistics betray a highly fluid situation where mobility

<sup>1</sup> School children in Okombahe made up 47 percent of the village population; in Namibia as a whole, children and young adults attending school accounted for only 37 percent of the total population. Girls continue to outnumber boys in school attendance by 54 percent to 46 percent. *National population and housing census, 1991* (1993; 1994).

between the outlying farms and the village is an integral part of the functioning of a wider subsistence economy.

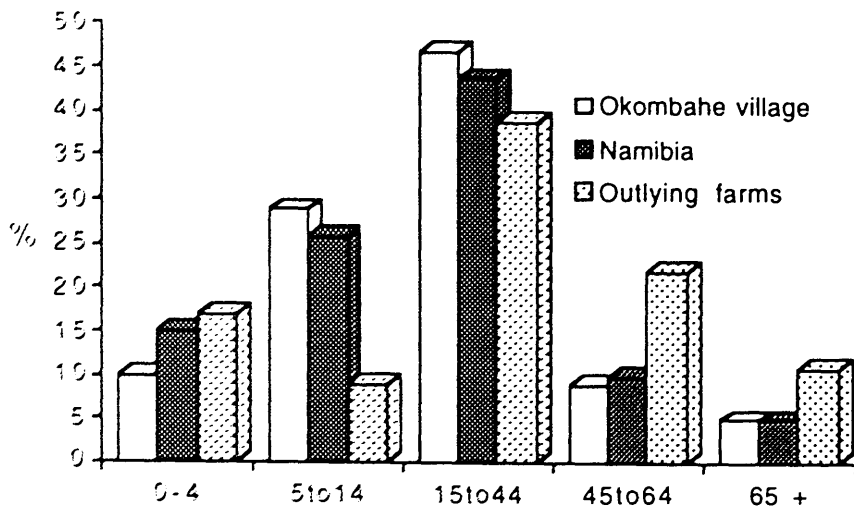


Fig. 5: Population of Okombahe, outlying farms in Okombahe Ward & Namibia 1991, in age groups as a percentage of total.

### The Local Economy

Unlike the situation of rural economies in many other parts of southern Africa such as Lesotho, where about half of the adult male population are absent migrant labourers, and 70% of rural household incomes are derived from this wage labour (Ferguson 1990:112), the economy of Okombahe remains by and large based on livestock production, although the development of the village during the last forty years has meant that the opportunities afforded by government jobs, development projects and an expanded educational system has transformed Okombahe village into a semi-urban centre. Schools have become the dominant institutions of the village and parents have reasoned that the education of their children is one of the few ways to broaden the limited opportunities inherent in this risk prone, marginal environment. The tragedy of this situation lies in the fact that few employment opportunities exist locally: the informal sector is poorly developed, and contributes little to the economic survival of the region's population. While there may not be a strong tradition of trading or craft work, it is certain that the physical environment and the low population density contribute to this lack of informal economic activity (Næraa *et al* 1993:81). School leavers lucky enough to find employment in the urban areas such as Swakopmund, Walvis Bay and Windhoek rarely

return to live in Okombahe. However, the urban migration of young men and women is relatively low (see figs. 4 & 5).<sup>2</sup> The majority of school leavers have few options and unemployment levels in Okombahe village were at least as high as fifty percent.<sup>3</sup> Young men seek support and work opportunities by visiting family members who live in other rural areas, towns or cities; young women are more likely to find low paid local employment as hostel cleaners or shop assistants and tend to live with their mothers, hoping eventually to establish an independent household and a stable marriage. A 'reverse migration' also exists in Okombahe as young men settle here temporarily from other rural areas or indeed from Namibia's larger towns where unskilled work is scarce.

Economic activity in the village is based mainly around low-paid government jobs, although as a ward centre, and now an Agricultural Development Centre, the number of skilled and semi-skilled government posts has increased. Two agricultural extension officers, a community development activator, six employees of Water Affairs, four technical employees of Ministry of Local Government and Housing, one nurse and her assistant, the ambulance driver, the local Councillor and approximately 16 full-time teachers make up the compliment of relatively well paid government employees in Okombahe. A host of subsidiary jobs such as unskilled labourers, hostel and office cleaners, school cooks, and assistants for the disabled and elderly, are attached to these various ministries. This waged employment generates more casual jobs and part-time work such as collecting and selling firewood, or washing and ironing clothes. Mini-businesses proliferate in this trickle-down economy: small amounts of capital are invested in commodities such as packets of cigarettes to be sold as singles, or bottles of liquor sold by the shot. Poached game and livestock are butchered and hawked from house to house, a mechanic and several 'apprentices' service the growing number of vehicles owned by government employees and farmers. A large proportion of this income finds its way to the tills of Okombahe's five shops, three liquor stores and one butchery,

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<sup>2</sup> The proportion of men and women in the 16 to 44 year old age group is 47 percent in Okombahe and 44 percent nationally: this distortion is probably accounted for by the presence of a disproportionate number of older pupils attending Diabasen Junior Secondary School as hostel boarders.

<sup>3</sup> The *Population and housing census, 1991 - Report C* (1994) disguises the true extent of unemployment: it shows 48% unemployment in Okombahe, a calculation which excludes individuals engaged in the most minor of subsistence activities such as brewing tombo, collecting fire-wood for sale or owning a few goats.

along with the best part of the village's eighty-five pension payments which are paid sporadically every two months.

Other income from farming, gardening, informal prospecting, mining and wage labour remittances are significant contributors to Okombahe's strapped cash economy. However, the village economy, as the skewed demography suggests, is integrally bound to the wider economy. For instance, there are only 30 registered farmers in the village: less than one in every ten households.<sup>4</sup> Only nine of these farmers keep cattle, one of whom owns a third of the total. The majority of village livestock owners keep goats in small herds of less than 20, while the ten largest farmers have flocks averaging 90 goats and sheep. This level of livestock production is almost insignificant in terms of the village economy as a whole and tends to disguise the fact that most of the village's inhabitants have links to farming households in the area outside of Okombahe. These links to rural farmsteads are mainly within the boundaries of the old reserve but many families also have direct links to households situated as far away as Spitzkoppe, Uis, Sorris Sorris and Khorixas.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to quantify the impact of the livestock farming economy on the village itself, but some indication of just how important this is, can be gleaned from the fact that there are ten times as many farmers per head of population living in the rural area of Okombahe Ward than in the village itself. Herds outside the village also tend to be larger: average sizes are double those recorded in the village. Fewer than 10 percent of these farmers had herds of 20 small stock or less, while the richest 10 percent had herds averaging in excess of 200 goats and sheep; the average herd for the remaining 80 percent was in the region of 60 head. Just over a third of farmers owned cattle, averaging 6 head per farmer. The proportion of women who own livestock has risen from 15 percent in 1957 to 38 percent in 1994.<sup>6</sup> It appears that women have established independent households during this period, possibly as a result of increasing instability in marriage relationships arising from the economic uncertainties ensuing from impoverishment caused by drought and rising unemployment.

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<sup>4</sup> This is less than one-third of the total recorded by Gordon in 1970 (1972:31).

<sup>5</sup> A high proportion of Okombahe's residents also have family members residing in urban settlements throughout southern Namibia such as Usakos, Karibib, Swakopmund, Omaruru, Walvis Bay and Windhoek.

<sup>6</sup> Derived from Kohler (1959:59) and Agricultural Extension Services Livestock Census of Okombahe Ward, 1994.



In practice there is no such thing as 'an average farmer', but taking the figure of 12 LSUs (the average herd size of the median 50 percent of livestock owners) and calculating cash income based on herd structure, fertility and mortality rates and market prices, the cash income in an 'average' year for such a farmer is in the order of N\$1,700 (£300): this does not take into account the value of milk, meat from culled animals and skins. The potential cash 'off-take' from livestock is significantly more than the cash injected into the local economy through government wages.<sup>7</sup>

After farming and government wages, pensions are probably the next most important source of external cash in Okombahe's economy. The results of a random survey of 44 households<sup>8</sup> in the village show that 30 percent of household income is derived from state retirement and disability pensions (N\$135 per month). Twenty-five percent of households were solely dependent on the income derived from one pension. The poorest 16% of households had either no cash income or a negligible amount (under N\$30 (£5) per month) and these were often dependants, young mothers and single unemployed men who received food from close family and many of whom were also eligible for food relief.

Many families have small fruit and vegetable gardens; these are generally thought of as a limited source of fresh food, a seasonal supplement to a diet of mealie pap and occasional meat, rather than as a source of cash income. During 1994, an area of less than 1 hectare within the river was planted with wheat and harvested at the end of the dry season (September to October); the decline in the riverine cultivation over the last decade is almost certainly due to the reduced wetland area in the river. It is unclear whether long-term rainfall decline, upstream damming or both account for the reduced annual flooding of the river at Okombahe - the extent to which increased ground water extraction for village consumption and the Rossing Garden Project are responsible for the falling water table in the river and

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<sup>7</sup>See Appendices # 1 & 2 for a detailed analysis of herd structure, fertility and mortality rates, herd off-take and communal livestock farming economics. Government wages were roughly calculated on the basis of typical pay scales where agricultural extension officers earn N\$1,500 per month; teachers N\$ 1,000; Technicians N\$900; unskilled labourers and cleaners N\$3-600; assistants to disabled and elderly N\$100.

<sup>8</sup> This survey did not include households of skilled or semi-skilled government employees, (teachers, extension officers, Water Affairs technicians) amounting to less than 10% of Okombahe's households.

hence the decline of riverine cultivation is another unknown.<sup>9</sup> It is clear however, that cultivation of the river has always been periodically curtailed because of drought.

Given the nature of this hand-to-mouth economy, it is not surprising that so few businesses exist let alone flourish here. Those that do are generally food stores and drankwinkels (bottle stores). The three main sources of cash injection into the local economy - livestock farming, government wages and pensions - are generally swallowed up by a few local merchants. Profits from these businesses provide additional low paid jobs, but on the whole, this economic process is an extractive one and capital accumulated from such businesses is taken out of local circulation and (more often than not) invested in commercial livestock farming. Furthermore, many government employees come to work here from other areas in Namibia and their wages are invested outside of Okombahe. During 1995, two other outlets for this capital were being developed; one shop keeper employed 10 garden labourers in the 'privatised' sector of the Rossing 'community' garden project while the other main shop keeper was expanding his premises in what appeared to be a successful effort to gain the village retail monopoly in food, alcohol and general merchandise.

### **Jansen**<sup>10</sup>

In many respects, Jansen is typical of farming settlements across Damaraland. It is situated within 5 kilometres of Okombahe, and the people who live here maintain close social and economic links with the village. However, Jansen is unusual insofar as it had a developing garden economy, one which had been more prevalent to communities such as Okombahe and Otjimbingwe in the past but which have declined dramatically in these larger settlements during the last 30 years. A small garden project had been started just before my first visit to Jansen in 1992. Three years later and during my stay, the pump, bore-hole and pipe-lines were handed over to the Jansen community: I was able to observe and to some extent become involved in the development and progress of this project.

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<sup>9</sup> The Rossing Garden Project was established in 1991. By 1996, over 12 hectares were periodically under cultivation using sprinkler irrigation. Water was drawn upstream from the village from a well and a deeper bore-hole.

<sup>10</sup> See the photo stories of Lucia & Tekla Goagoseb, Ishmael ‡Kharichab, Jacky Pietersen and Maria Pietersen Abubakar in Chapters 1 & 2.

Jansen is dispersed along the banks of the Omaruru River, which is a flat sandy expanse, over 200 metres wide, running west between thick stands of ana boom, prosopis, tamarix, leadwood and ebony trees. The fine silty soil fringing the banks of the river supports a ribbon of separate gardens which lie between the dense shady trees and the more open, rocky slopes. These rocky slopes support a scattering of acacia thorn, commiphora trees and a sparse grassland after brief summer rains. Houses sit on the lower edge of this rocky hillside, away from the danger of rare violent floods, and in the intense glare of the sun. Constructed of a variety of materials ranging from mud brick rectangular dwellings with corrugated tin roofs, to tin shacks and wattle and daub circular structures these small houses and temporary shacks are clustered in family groups.

There were eleven homesteads in Jansen, two of which were constructed during the year of my stay. Of these, three were occupied by paid labourers in the absence of their employers, one of whom worked in Walvis Bay, the other two in Okombahe. The remaining eight were permanently occupied by five extended families, one elderly couple and 2 bachelors. On at least six other sites, derelict abandoned houses or the signs of recent habitation were reminders of a fluctuating population.

I could find out very little about the history of the settlement from its present inhabitants. The name Jansen, I was told, derived from a European prospector who lived in the area around the turn of the century. It is unclear as to whether this was his name, the surname of a Bastard servant or employee, or a commemoration of the Catholic sect started by the Belgian theologian of that name in the 17th century whose doctrine maintains the inherent perversity and inability for good of the natural human will. Such convolutions and conflation of meaning and place are common in Namibia's deeply inscribed colonial landscape.

The presence of 'coloureds' and 'bastards' in the vicinity of Okombahe is not uncommon today, nor was it 120 years ago. The family names of my neighbours in Jansen hark back to the 19th century: William Coates Palgrave, the British Special Emissary to South West Africa (1876 - 1885) mentions the presence of Paul Pietersen and David Beukes, both 'Bastards' at a meeting with the Swartbooi Namas at Ameib in the Erongo Mountains in 1876 (1991:28). That these European surnames found their way into the area under the guise of 'Bastard' identities during the 19th century is in all likelihood no different from the manner in which Maria Pietersen (whose

mother's maiden name was Beukes) will pass her Damara identity on to her daughter with the Nigerian surname of Abubakar in the 21st.

In 1956, Jansen had an adult population of 115, almost five times as many as today (Köhler 1959). It is likely the 1956 census records a transient, swollen population of resettled Windhoek Damaras who soon dispersed to surrounding locations, or made their way north to Sorris Sorris and Aniṭgab.<sup>11</sup> Lucia /Goagases, who married into a local family in the late 1940s, explained that the de-population of the settlement was brought about by drought, urban migration of the young and the consequent withering of the population as the elderly died off. The demise of the dairy industry which boosted the economy of the reserve during the 1950s was also to blame for Jansen's depopulation.

Jansen's population fluctuations, even during the year in which I was there, serves as an illustration of a common and wide-spread phenomenon. Pre-school aged grandchildren were often left with their grandparents while their parents worked in town and the influx of children visiting parents and grandparents during the school holidays could sometimes more than double the population of the settlement for several weeks at a time. Working adults themselves return to their parents' houses when they become unemployed or fall out with their spouses. Members of the extended family, such as young single men, would visit in the hopes of finding employment in the area or to re-establish and maintain kinship ties. Connections to family entail opportunities to settle on communal land in the vicinity of kin thereby attracting newly married couples, the recently unemployed and the elderly to already established communal settlements. These family networks functioned as a constantly shifting safety-net of support in an insecure economic environment. This insecurity was underscored by the uncertainties inherent in a subsistence economy based on pastoralism: migration in search of better grazing meant that farmers from other areas in the vicinity of Okombahe settled on the outskirts<sup>of</sup> Jansen in order to utilise the riverine vegetation during times of drought. During severe drought, even these resources became depleted and families abandoned their

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<sup>11</sup> The Augiekas farmers who had been settled in areas scattered between Otjimbingwe and Sorris Sorris staged a protest over this dispossession soon after independence. Several hundred people camped outside the nature reserve which had previously been their home and demanded restitution of their land rights in 1992-3 during the drought which affected many Damara farmers. Eventually, a commercial farm near Otjimbingwe was provided by the government.



homesteads for several years as they moved to other areas in search of grazing; Lucia and her extended family had only recently returned to Jansen after moving down river during the 1991-3 drought (see Chapter 2, pp. 169-174).

During the year I stayed in Jansen ongoing disputes over access to water arose as an indirect result of a new garden project which supplied a pump, bore-hole, reservoir and pipe-lines so that a constant supply of water was now available for garden irrigation. While the project donors insisted that water should be available to everyone in Jansen, it was to be restricted to irrigation use only and in practice the distribution of water was controlled by the men who oversaw the maintenance of the pump. It had been left to the 'community' to decide amongst itself on what basis water would be distributed to the various gardens and how funds would be collected for diesel and repairs. Several other sources of water were already in existence and access to these was governed by different sets of 'rules'. Many families had dug their own wells near the river from which they drew water, either by hand or by pump. Pumps were controlled by individual families although a communal water point for livestock existed which drew water from the well of the largest gardener in the settlement - both the pump and diesel for this reservoir were supplied by the Department of Water Affairs in Okombahe for community use. Families such as Lucia's who had only recently returned to Jansen were reliant on their own hand drawn wells, but as the water level in these fell, they became dependent on the communal reservoir for their livestock.

The initial excitement about the completion of the garden project and the security this provided as a constant reliable source of water, soon led to tension over the rights to its use. Several families complained bitterly that it had been appropriated by the three inter-related families who operated and maintained the pump. I attended two community meetings which were called in order to address this issue, but when the time came for people to voice their complaints, fear of being cut off completely made them hold their tongues. One of the underlying problems related to the chaotic implementation of the new National Water Policy (Republic of Namibia 1993) which threatened to end state supplies of free diesel to communal farmers. Jansen residents who were in receipt of fuel contributed some of this for the running of the garden pump, while others like Lucia contributed their own cash, which struck them as patently unfair. Suspicion grew as

accounts and records of the costs and consumption of diesel for the garden water were withheld. An *ad hoc* system had developed where everyone had access to water for their gardens and livestock, but this was controlled by the 'good will' of a few, and uncertainty about the next day's supply of water for young crops and livestock nagged the poorer inhabitants of the settlement.

A temporary solution was finally found after almost a year of tension: at Lucia's instigation a meeting to discuss these problems was called which brought together the gardeners, the councillor and officials from the Department of Water Affairs. It was agreed that the government would supply a barrel of diesel to the garden project, and it was established that all farmers in Jansen would have access to the communal water point for livestock. A permanent resolution to the rights to garden water was put off until the issue of payment for diesel arose again in several months time.

One indication that such fluid definitions relating to communal access to water have a history of temporarily negotiated resolutions was evident in one of Lucia's strategies to assert her rights. Several decades previously, her family had cultivated a small garden plot near the new garden project bore-hole and the well which supplied the communal livestock watering point. In the intervening years it had become over-grown with thick *prosopis* and *acacia* trees. She 'gave' this plot to her daughter Tekla who felled the area as a symbolic gesture of ownership which reasserted previous rights to the water which they had drawn from the near-by well. Although Tekla had neither the means to fence this garden or the intention to do so, it was a powerful reminder of her usufruct rights over communal resources. More recently established households in Jansen had to rely on establishing good relationships with older residents who controlled access to water.

The garden project itself brought positive benefits to the people of Jansen and it quickly became the envy of people living in similar small settlements further down stream: access to reliable supplies of water is the most important aspect of economic stability and development in this marginal arid landscape. However, the project's purpose was in danger of spectacular failure insofar as marketing and distribution had been almost completely ignored in the project design. And while food security was undoubtedly enhanced for a few families in Jansen, the project's potential to effect the development of the local economy was severely limited.

The social tensions which arose from the Jansen garden project are indicative of a general pattern of tenure and water rights which operate in this pastoral economy where mobility in response to drought is the norm. In the majority of rural settlements, rights to grazing are indistinguishable from water rights, and these depend on the ownership of pumps. Many water installations are owned by the state and are conceptualised in the same way as land but this does not necessarily imply a free-for-all open access situation. Control of resources is governed by a constellation of social practices reflected in the open negotiation which accompanies the establishment of kinship networks and informal reciprocity. The small settlement of Arixa Ams, situated on the south-eastern flank of the Brandberg is typical of how communal settlements accommodate a constantly fluctuating population based on the contingencies of the environment and the operation of social networks in the context of fluid, negotiated resource rights.

I first visited Arixa Ams in April 1994. The effects of the recent drought on this small settlement on the edge of the Namib were evident in the number of abandoned houses and derelict kraals scattered over an area of about twenty hectares, where a minor drainage valley leading into the Tsiseb River supported a scattered acacia woodland on its broad grassy bed. A bore-hole, wind pump and cement dam had been installed here in 1951 when the Okombahe reserve was expanded; the first settler was Samuel //Gaseb who had moved here from northern Damaraland and was now the oldest resident in Arixa Ams. I met his middle-aged son, who was here for the weekend, camping in his small tin house while on leave from his job in the Rossing Uranium Mine. Otherwise, only two households were occupied by Samuel and Lydia, who lived together as man and wife, although they maintained separate houses and separate kraals.

Previously, I had tried to locate a settlement called "Small Daob !Goas" situated not far to the north, which had been well documented during the 1970s by the South African ethnologist Du Pisani (1978). Daob !Goas had also been settled by people who had moved from southern Kaokoland in 1951, but had been abandoned shortly after Du Pisani's study ended, due to drought. Little evidence of its former existence was visible in 1994, although

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<sup>12</sup> See the photo stories of Christolene Goses in Chapters 1 & 2.

I was eventually able to trace a few of the people who had lived there at the time of Du Pisani's research in the mid 1970s. The dispersal of Daob !Goas' population during the 1979-84 drought was typical of what I had observed more recently in other settlements across Damaraland. A few relatives still lived near-by in small villages adjacent to the Ugab River, others had moved to Uis, Okombahe, Khorixas, Swakopmund or back into the Odendaal farms from which they had originally come. Several of the children who spent their early lives in Daob !Goas had been sent to school in larger towns and were now school teachers themselves.

Apart from tracing the movements of people, what initially interested me was the prospect of being able to compare the detailed descriptions of subsistence practices recorded by Du Pisani with those of the present. I was soon struck by the similarity between his descriptions of hut construction, animal husbandry practices, veld food collection and gardening with what I observed taking place in adjacent settlements in 1994. I returned to Arixas in August that year, intending to camp for several weeks in order to see if Du Pisani's observations of pastoral practice and indigenous knowledge had changed substantially during the eighteen year interval. Since this was one of the oldest and most remote areas of Damara settlement still inhabited by people who practised a 'traditional' herding and foraging way of life, Du Pisani had set out to look for archaeological analogies related to settlement and subsistence with reference to the extremely arid environmental conditions of the area.<sup>13</sup> Within a short period of time, I had corroborated almost all of his observations: very little had changed in this regard. However, since his study was based on only a few months of observations, it gives a false impression of permanence in relation to the settlement. While subsistence practices might be seen to have continuity with the archaeological evidence of pastoralism in this arid environment, it fails to address the central issue of mobility which underlies these practices.

During several extended visits to Arixas over the following year and a half, I observed many changes consistent with historical patterns of

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<sup>13</sup> Several well preserved and unrecorded archaeological sites exist in the immediate vicinity of Arixas. Early and Late Stone Age tools and rock paintings were found in abundance at seasonal water holes between the settlement and the Brandberg. The presence of pastoralists during the last millennium might be induced from several small hut enclosures dotted in isolated valleys. The inhabitants of Arixas showed very little interest in these traces of the past, although the author was proudly shown several classic examples of ancient bag-shaped clay pots, shards of which are common throughout the area.



small scale migration. In 1994, the drought which affected northern Damaraland brought an influx of farmers into the Ugab area which also coincided with the return of desert elephants to the river from further north.<sup>14</sup> These incursions had repercussions as farmers in the Ugab began to move to other less heavily grazed areas; one of these was Arix Ams, twenty kilometres to the south. The wide networks of Samuel's and Lydia's families attracted three new farmers to the settlement. Another young couple were encouraged to come here from Uis by the local agricultural extension officer.<sup>15</sup> During a period of six months the livestock population rose from 70 goats and sheep to over 300 and the human population rose from three adults to twelve, plus three children. By the end of the year this had fallen again to a level mid-way between the two extremes. Lydia's and Samuel's herds were to grow by over 50% during the two following years, and was typical of rapid herd rebuilding after drought.

While rains had been good in 1995, problems with the wind pump meant that for several months, farmers had to water their stock at one of several water points in settlements between six and ten kilometres away. These alternative arrangements were negotiated on the basis of kinship, payment in cash or barter towards the costs of diesel, or the availability of water which was contingent on the efficiency of wind pumps. The social networks established over generations, the usufruct rights which accrued from past migrations and a general acceptance that everybody would at some time find themselves in the similar situation of needing to move to areas of better grazing or more reliable water, ensured that this whole process took place with a minimum of conflict.

The flexibility inherent in this social system which confers grazing and water rights to individuals across many widely separated localities was illustrated when Samuel's daughter-in-law Eliade, returned to Arix Ams in 1995. Several years previously, Samuel had given his herd of eight cattle to his eldest son, as many Damara parents do when they approach old age, so that with this asset, his son would look after him and also be assured of his inheritance at Samuel's death.<sup>16</sup> Shortly after this, drinking tombo, which is

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<sup>14</sup> Elephants had not been seen on the river for at least fifty years. Apart from frightening local people, the elephants vandalised several wind pumps and broke down the house of at least one farmer and ate the Ana pods which he had stored there as fodder for his livestock.

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 2, page 177 for Christolene Goses' description of this couple.

<sup>16</sup> Family feuds over inheritance and the 'asset stripping' of elderly relatives is a common subject of gossip in rural Damaraland.

a dominant pastime in Namibian rural life, took its toll one night in Arixas. During a drunken argument, Eliade was forced to defend herself against her husband who had become increasingly violent and abusive: in trying to defend herself, she struck him over the head with an iron rod and killed him, almost instantly. This tragedy, which would undoubtedly have brought a jail sentence for man-slaughter in a court of law, was over-looked by the police who investigated the incident: domestic violence is commonly viewed as a family matter in Damara society and as such, is left outside the jurisdiction of the law. However, Samuel was bitter about the death of his son and Eliade was forced to leave Arixas with the cattle which had previously been Samuel's but which she now inherited as her husband's heir. Having had no contact with her husband's family for two years, the ample grazing around Arixas brought her back in 1995, accompanied by her new boy-friend and her son's girl friend. She erected her own house and kraal and was accepted as having usufruct rights to the settlement's resources, although a palpable tension continued to exist between her and the //Gaseb family.

Other new-comers to the settlement included an impoverished single mother and her 20 year old son. They had been one of the last families to leave their now deserted village on the banks of the Ugab. She was a distant relation of Lydia and came here in desperation with a dozen goats and the bare essentials of a pot, a bag of mealie meal and some sheets of tin which were hastily erected as a shelter from the cool night mist and the blazing heat of the day. Her son soon departed to look for work in one of the local mines and she was left to look after her daughters' three young grandchildren.

Another young couple who settled here were employed by a farmer who held a government job in the settlement of Anisgab some forty kilometres to the north east. Like many communal farm labourers, he was paid a small amount of cash (N\$50) each month and given mealie meal which could be supplemented with goats' milk and very occasionally, some meat. Within the year, this couple had moved away again with their employer's stock. Boredom and hunger were the unrelieved conditions of life for these poorer inhabitants of Arixas. The few older inhabitants who received pensions used much of this income to brew tombo and it was not uncommon to find every adult in Arixas drunk for several days running, while it lasted. As dispiriting as this appeared, it was an all to

common response to the hunger and hopelessness which pervades life in such small isolated settlements.

Several young adults came and went during this period. One young man stayed here long enough to acquire two donkeys from his grandfather. He built a donkey cart from the abundant scrap metal which littered the settlement and soon left to support himself by selling firewood in the township of Uis. Bernardo, Christolene's man, kept a few goats in the kraals of two of his relatives and returned here from time to time to look after his interests and to help his grandfather. To young men such as this, Arixá Ams was one of several places in which they maintained future rights of residence through kinship ties, but the limited opportunities for social and economic advancement meant that their stays were often brief. Several young women also lived here, but their presence was by-and-large temporary and contingent on the fact that they had no money and no other place to live while their husbands or boy-friends worked in local mines.

### **Mobility, Kinship, Domains of Wealth and Pathways of Exchange**

These descriptions of small peripheral settlements illustrate the highly fluid nature of rural populations in Damaraland and the inter-connections which exist between outlying settlements and villages such as Okombahe. This mobility and inter-connectedness reveals an essential facet of social and economic relations implicit to Damara pastoral practice: conceptualisations of property, rights to natural resources and flexible notions of kinship are defined as inherently fluid and contested areas of communal life. The answer to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter as to whether 'the past is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms' has only been partially addressed. In seeking to analyse how the economy of Okombahe has changed in recent decades, it is necessary to see that factors affecting long-term household security are not strictly confined to an analysis of cash income and expenditure: conceptions of property, rights to natural resources and the participation in social networks is essential to understanding the continuity and change implicit to the social economy of Damara communal life. However, there is little to suggest that the fundamental premises on which pastoral practice is based, in terms of social relations and rights to resources, have changed in any significant way since Okombahe was first settled in 1870.

In her discussion of the social economy of Okombahe during the closing decades of the last century, Brigitte Lau observes that settled life here entailed a restructuring of concepts of property (Lau 1979:47; 1985:15). Implicit in this assertion of social and cultural transformation is the assumption that the culturally constituted principles of exchange operating in Damara pre-settlement society (presumably reciprocity practices characterising hunter-gatherer economies) was replaced by a kind of universal system of monetary exchange concomitant with Christian ideology, merchant capital, and trade based on a global economic system. The cash economy is certainly an indication of the relative level of peasant production within the national economy, but it is only one indication of wealth, stratification and inequality within Okombahe's peasant, subsistence economy. Within this marginal cash economy, concepts of property based on cash represent only one category within a constellation of 'properties' which enable people to survive.

Several different and non-comparable forms of wealth exist in the village's social economy: access to water, housing, land, livestock, kinship networks, (including children and married partners) commodities or consumer goods and cash are all 'domains of wealth' connected or excluded from commodity 'pathways' which structure the whole notion of property and exchange (Ferguson 1992:69). In order to see behind the facade of 'peasant production' it is necessary to examine how property and wealth is structured, maintained, and transformed or subverted.

Three fundamental 'domains of wealth' structure conceptualisations of property and define the pathways along which commodities move: land, kinship and the cash economy.

Land is an overarching environmental given - it is not a commodity in itself - it is a domain of exchange which functions in much the same way as banks do in the capitalist economy: its currency fluctuates as natural resources become abundant and scarce; it is the raw material upon which kinship and the cash economy pattern relations of production but is not confined by either one of these systems. Damara land tenure practises have much in common with pastoral systems in other arid regions of Africa such as the Wodaabe of Niger whose territorial organisation is based on a first-come, first serve basis (Vedeld 1992:7). In spite of colonial policies which imposed a communal land system with rights of tenure based on social affiliation (involving lineage, class and ethnicity) Damara farmers continue



to operate within a much more adaptable system (Rohde 1992: 56). Flexible notions of kinship structure individuals' rights of access to the land's natural resources although the absence of kinship ties does not necessarily exclude individuals' rights of access to land; Nama, Bastard, Coloured and Herero farmers live in predominantly Damara farming communities with few if any signs of conflict related to ethnicity. Both kinship and land are domains of wealth which in their different ways defy conceptual closure.

Damara communal tenure systems assign rights to variable types of resources: different categories of water points, kinds of arable field sites, transhumance routes, trees, riverine pastures, wet-season pastures, and so on. These different categories of resources are generally not held by a single 'ownership' unit. Gardens might be controlled by households and grazing controlled by a small group of co-resident households. Bore holes might be controlled to varying degrees by resident farmers while natural springs are open to the wider community. "Mobility is possible because these ownership types are not territorially distinct, but possess overlapping and potentially conflicting rights to different categories of resources in one area." (Behnke 1992:8)

Access to water is an obvious prerequisite for any structure of wealth or pathway of exchange - like land, it is thought of as a communal possession, but unlike land it must be extracted, pumped by engine or lifted by hand, either by individuals or by government agencies since it is only rarely available *carte blanche* (at springs and river wetlands). Secure access to a reliable source of water is the most important factor in livestock production and gardening; access to water is what drew Okombahe into a settlement in the first place. As a commodity which structures influences forms of wealth and pathways of exchange, the significance of water in the social economy of Damaraland can not be underestimated. The ways in which it is shared, conceptualised and contested are keys to understanding property relations regarding land, housing, livestock and people. Recent attempts by the state to privatise communal water supplies (Republic of Namibia 1993; Africare 1994) have met with severe logistical and practical obstacles due to an underestimation of the complexity of social relations surrounding the use of water<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 9 for a discussion of water as a communal resource and the conflicts which arise from poorly defined rights to water in relation to recent development policy.

Housing comprises a very narrow pathway of exchange: houses can be bought, sold or inherited but generally are not, because they are either dismantled and re-erected when the occupants move, or abandoned and a new dwelling constructed with materials to hand. Houses are a form of private property which substantiate an individual's rights of residence on communal land. They symbolise their owner's rights of tenancy. Since land is only rarely available on an 'open access' basis, houses substantiate individual and family usufruct rights to the land's natural resources: grazing, water, firewood, veld-food etc. These rights are embodied in houses even when they remain abandoned and their owners are absent for many years.

Although they have an easily calculated cash value, in practice, livestock may also be equated with narrow pathways of exchange. Livestock are a form of wealth which is resistant to the demands of family members and generally understood to be outside of obligations of reciprocity: a form of long-term investment which enables even the very poor to invest in this productive process since it is not subject to the otherwise all pervasive demands of poor family members and neighbours. At the same time livestock ownership conveys a special social value expressed through the status and respect which goes with the sharing of meat.

Wealth in people can be double edged - spouses, children and loyal friends are also thought of as positive assets, either as wage earners, labourers or as a means of extending an individual's mobility and opportunities. Individuals who belong to a wide kinship network are beneficiaries of enhanced opportunities, but such networks can also act as a constant drain on the relatively wealthy individuals within it. "Money breaks up families" and "Your family can eat you" are common expressions of the conflict often inherent in such situations. Relationships of reciprocity within families or between friends can be put under enormous strain during times of drought; informal transfers of food, clothes and money which might normally take place become less frequent as poverty forces families and individuals to help themselves first. The climatic trend of declining rainfall since 1980 has put pressure on sharing relationships as each drought episode creates deeper poverty and recovery becomes more difficult for everyone.

Commodities - food, clothing and consumer goods - are often circulated outside of any cash or cash-value system. Such exchanges function as

indicators of social relations, a measure of investment in terms of loyalty, trust and future dependability or the repayment of past favours, a kind of generalised delayed exchange. In fact, cash itself is sometimes treated in the same way, as if it is unrelated to its exchange value - this can be explained in two ways. In the first place, the existence of huge wealth disparities in Namibia and the obviously small amounts of cash which most people live with can at times find expression in a 'perverse' disregard for the exchange value of money, often associated with excessive alcohol consumption or persistent 'begging' from tourists. On the other hand, magnanimous generosity is associated with the high social status of a 'big man' (*Kai-aob*).

### **The Big Man Metaphor**

During my first trip to Damaraland in 1992, I happened across a memorial to Simson Gobs a few kilometres south of Okombahe at the site of his death in a car accident. There by the road side, in the shadow of Okombahe, the steep dark basalt hill from which the village takes its name (known in Damara as //Ganeb) and surrounded by a shrine-like arrangement of aloes planted within a rectangular enclosure, stood a large black marble stone engraved with the following inscription:

He died on 4 May 1985 in a very unacceptable, dubious, suspicious car accident. Mountain //GANEB, speak up for the life shield of GOBS is vilely cast away as though you //GANEB were not eyeing. We request you //Ganeb to speak up for Gobs... You //GANEB are the only witness.

I published a brief description of this in my MSc dissertation, describing Gobs as "one of the martyrs in the struggle for Independence" (1993:37). At the time I knew very little else about the man, except that he had been a young prominent figure in the homeland's Damara Council. During my year of fieldwork in Okombahe I discovered much more about this well-known personality who was variously described as either a kind of Damara Robin Hood or as a corrupt politician and petty criminal. In any case he embodied the ideal of the Big Man or *Kai-aob*.

One young woman in Okombahe told me that when she was attending high school in Otjiwarongo she would occasionally need money for her return 'hike' after the school holidays. Simson Gobs was always ready to

assist with small amounts of money, straight out of the cash register of his bottlestore/ shop in Okombahe. Several elderly people told me that he brought them mealie meal - his 'generosity' was legendary in the Okombahe area. It was said that he always took food and sweets for poor people and children when he travelled in rural areas and that he always had time to stop and listen to poor people's problems. That he had been brought to account by the South West Africa Administration (SWAA) for allegations of corruption, embezzlement, misappropriation of government funds and misuse of government assets only served to heighten his status among ordinary Damara people, who described him as a highly ethical man, sympathetic to the plight of his people and only too willing to beat the SWAA at their own game of corrupt governance.

In 1983, the Thirion Commission was appointed to investigate allegations of misappropriation of state funds in the Damara Homeland. Simson Gobs features prominently in the reports of proceedings in Khorixas, the administrative centre of Damaraland at the time. Articles published in the *Windhoek Observer* describe him as "the most flamboyant politician in the country. Dressed to the kill at times and with his attitude of bravado few can ignore this wealthy businessman. . . [He was] probably the best dressed man in Damaraland. Mr Gobs arrived at the Commission in a corduroy suit with the trimmings of a frilly shirt and a black bowtie. His arrival and departure at the Government buildings was also one of great show - when he drove his green Mercedes 1977 model for which he received the loan money of R14,000 [from the Damara Council] - leaving tyre marks around the government parking lot" (April 16, 1983). Allegations of illegal loans for cars, furniture, erecting shops and houses and irregularities surrounding the purchase of commercial farms subsequently leased to prominent Damara Council members were brought to the notice of the Commission.

By May, more allegations pertaining to Gobs' misappropriation of State materials and machinery to construct a 'private estate' known as "Gobs' Little Corners" in Omaruru were brought before the Commission. Again, Gobs is described as "smooth talking", "trying his luck again", "militant", "abusive" and "flamboyant". The most stunning disclosure of the Commission, however, drew little comment from journalists, but it is indicative of the extent to which the homeland government was reacting to the political climate created by the South African regime's 'homeland' policy: given a budget of 20 million rands which came in the form of a yearly



allocation made by the Central Treasury in Windhoek, the Damara Council managed to overspend by 9 million rands in the financial year 1982-3; the Council generated only 640,000 rands as its own contribution to the Homeland government's budget. It was indeed a "money picnic", "like the jug of the Biblical widow from which the oil poured forth" (as expressed in the sardonic Protestant style of the *Windhoek Observer*). Gobs was widely admired for his audacity and ability to take advantage of the white apartheid regime in this way. Several of his more discreet political associates, less flamboyant *Kai aob* including King Justus //Garoeb and the present regional councillor for Khorixas district Simson Tjongerero have remained in political office since that time.

Gobs' memorial was erected by his younger brother, who later admitted to me that his initial suspicions of foul-play in Gobs' death were unfounded. He was a young single man at the time his brother's died, but as a result of this, he was propelled into public life, becoming a councillor in the Damara leadership, marrying Gobs' wife and moving into his brother's 'illegally built' 'palatial' house in the Khorixas township. He tends to play down his position as a *Kai-aoba*, having avoided the corruption associated with being a leader in a Bantustan government. One of my first insights into the role and responsibility of a *Kai-aoba* was when he arranged to meet me at the exclusive, German owned Khorixas Restcamp one morning before we were to travel north together. As we were leaving the rest camp's dining room, he appropriated several bowls of fresh fruit, with the complete complicity of the Damara staff who looked on. Later that day, as he stopped to greet people at the road-side or to give them 'hike', he 'redistributed' the rest camp's oranges and apples.

### **The 'little man'**

The vitality of the Big Man metaphor is of course dependent on the powerlessness of many 'small men', and the enormous wealth disparities which typify Namibia's social economy. The Big Man is 'big' precisely because his position and power place him outside of the normative laws which govern relationships of exclusiveness and sharing. The commodity pathways which structure the social relations of the majority of Okombahe's inhabitants are idealised in the behaviour of *Kai aoba*. The fluid boundaries which define rights to property and relations of exchange in the day-to-day

lives of the poor are subject to continual negotiation and testing: the 'big man' appears to escape the anxiety which accompanies this social response to uncertainty.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of social networks in maintaining access to commodity pathways and rights to property is expressed in many ways. People are continually 'on the move', maintaining and establishing relationships with friends and family in other parts of Damaraland or in the townships adjoining the region's major towns. As with more casual friendships, kinship relations are subject to heavy pressure when the expectation of sharing by poorer family members puts seemingly impossible pressures on more wealthy wage earners. This tension between the ideal of sharing and the need to protect one's assets from the seemingly insatiable demands of poorer individuals is generalised in communal society. It manifests itself in an underlying tension which is ultimately violent: it finds release in domestic fights, drunkenness and most commonly in gossip.

Many facets of the conflicts which revolve around sharing and the maintenance of boundaries have been illustrated by the Okombahe photographers, and contextualized in my discussion of the circumstances in which they live. Ten of these sixteen individuals had left Okombahe by the time the exhibition was held in Windhoek. The reasons for this were bound up in the complex issues raised by this chapter's discussion of sharing and exclusion in an economic environment subject to severe environmental constraints and a marginalised subsistence economy, both of which have played decisive roles in shaping Okombahe's history. The theoretical implications of this, specifically in relation to rural development policy, land reform and community based natural resource management will be discussed in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

Environmental issues play an increasingly important role in government policy related to rural development. Just as ethnographic and historical (mis)representations of the Damara have given rise to negative stereotypes, assumptions of environmental degradation based on outmoded theories of rangeland management now pose a new threat to Damara farmers as development discourse increasingly fills the political ground once occupied by colonialism. In Part III, which follows, the environmental

history of communal settlements such as Okombahe will be analysed in order to disentangle the feed-back effects between climate, pastoral practice and social economy.

## **PART III**

### **INTERPRETING THE LANDSCAPE: PASTORALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE**



CHAPTER 7  
LOOKING INTO THE PAST:  
MATCHED PHOTOGRAPHY AND VEGETATION CHANGE<sup>1</sup>

Specific readings of environmental change should [. . .] be treated less in terms of their claims to 'truth', and more in terms of the implicit social commitments that underlie them and on the validity of which they depend.

Leach & Mearns in *The lie of the land* (1996: 31)

Environmental issues have become increasingly important in Namibian policy formation and development initiatives. Considerable emphasis is presently being placed on the goal of achieving sustainable development through policy reform which aims to reverse negative human impacts on renewable resources. This objective informs many government activities including economic planning, agricultural policy, land reform, tourism and population policy (*National Agricultural Policy* 1995; *Outline of a National Land Policy*, May 1996 : Republic of Namibia 1995c & 1996). Policies are increasingly justified on the basis of their ability to link social and economic problems to environmental issues; the perceived need to reverse processes of land degradation and desertification has become a doctrine underpinning current development ideology. However, many uncertainties surround our knowledge of ecosystem functioning, especially in dynamic low-rainfall environments. Our limited understanding of ecological processes involving environmental change as a result of human impacts, should lend some caution to the impulse of planners to make policy on unsubstantiated assumptions about land-degradation and desertification.

It is possible to show that the interests of various actors in development - government agents, officials of donor agencies, the staff of Northern and Southern non-governmental organizations, and independent 'experts' - are served by the perpetuation of orthodox views, particularly those regarding the destructive role of local inhabitants. Pejorative attitudes and repressive policies towards pastoralists, for example, have been well-served by the view that they cause desertification, or bring about a tragedy of the commons (Leach & Mearns 1996: 19-20).

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a slightly altered version of an article published by Dinteria (Rohde 1997).

Our ability to understand the causes of land degradation is dependent on an historical record of how the physical environment has actually changed over climatic cycles and through the impact of growing population pressure, accelerated natural resource use and intensified livestock farming. Namibia has few long-term sources of environmental monitoring from which to draw in order to verify physical change in the environment. What is more, even where such data is available, the analysis of causal change is subject to debate: constructing ecological models, determining appropriate rangeland management practices and creating policies which address social and economic development are complex, inter-related and ongoing.

Land degradation in this arid environment is commonly ascribed to inappropriate 'traditional' land tenure and land use systems coupled to population growth and sedentarization. These factors (among others) are said to result in unsustainable natural resource use leading to a depletion of grazing resources, soil erosion, bush encroachment and irreversible loss of productivity (Seely *et al* 1995; NAPCOD 1996:8,22,42). This emphasis on policy reform regarding land tenure has serious implications if applied without regard to fundamental environmental and social differences which exist in Namibia's various communal areas. The Namibian Programme to Combat Desertification (NAPCOD) has recently produced a document stating that many instances of land degradation can be attributed to "the fact that rural communities do not have secure, exclusive tenure over natural resources (1996: iii). That land degradation is assumed to be taking place as a matter of fact and that land tenure reform is necessary to reverse this trend is highly probable in many communal areas, but both of these assumptions lack evidence in the communal areas of former Damaraland.

Previous consultancy surveys in Damaraland, such as that carried out by Loxton, Hunting & Associates (1974), have assumed that severe deterioration of the veld was taking place as a result of mismanagement and called for the development of a land-use plan based on a one-off 'snap-shot' survey. Their recommendations were based on prevailing commercial range management theory which took little account of the realities of either communal practice or firm evidence of environmental degradation.<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Lands Resettlement and Rehabilitation is presently carrying out

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<sup>2</sup> The Loxton & Hunting Report (1974) gives a conservative stocking capacity of 84,000 LSUs to Damaraland. Census records show that livestock populations varied widely from 90,000 LSUs in 1979, to 20,000 LSUs in 1982 and recovered to a high of 101,000 in 1991. See Appendix # 7. See also, Rohde (1993: 59-60).

a similar exercise in Kunene Region with the aim of developing a land use plan based on more comprehensive social, economic and environmental research. However, it too lacks the historic dimension necessary to interpreting both the extent and causes of environmental change. Since there are no long-term ecological studies of the impact which both commercial and communal farming has had on the environment of former Damaraland, I found matched photography a particularly useful means of looking into the past.

Matched photography was my starting point in examining the environmental history of the study area and provides a basis for the integrated analysis of communal farming within the Erongo and Southern Kunene Regions, especially in regard to property relations, land tenure and proposed communal land tenure reform<sup>3</sup>. This study's focus is necessarily confined to the vegetation types and the specific land-use histories of one part of Western Namibia: as such it is place specific and therefore makes no claims for an extension of policy implications which arise, to other ecological zones or land-use regimes within adjacent areas of Namibia. This chapter has two purposes: first, to describe and evaluate the methodology of using matched photos and secondly, to describe my observations of vegetation change at four sites, in the light of current presumptions about degradation that are influencing policy reform.

## Methodology

Matched photography has been used in at least 450 studies world-wide, many of which were conducted in semi-arid environments. Well-known studies include *The changing mile* (Hastings & Turner 1965) and *A legacy of change* (Bahre 1991) from the Sonoran Desert in the USA; *Photographic documentation of vegetational changes in Africa over a third of a century* (Shantz & Turner 1958) and Hoffman and Cowling's study (1990) of vegetation change in the Karoo. The methodology described in this article is derived from Rogers *et al* (1984), Hoffman & Cowling (1990), Hoffman *et al* (1995) and from M. Timm Hoffman (pers. comm.).

This methodology is available to anyone with a basic knowledge of cameras and a modicum of common sense. As a means of provoking

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<sup>3</sup> See Rohde 1993 & 1994 for further discussion of the history, sociology and ecology of this area.

relevant questions about environmental change in a specific location it is a powerful tool in providing high quality comparative information directly through an image without having to resort to statistical analysis and specialised expert knowledge. When comparing images from two separate time periods, one is immediately aware of significant changes in the density of vegetation, species composition and often important information regarding species' morphology. Questions arising from a comparison of matched photos can then be related to histories of environmental variables such as rainfall, fire, wildlife and human impacts such as farming activities and resource use, thus building a profile of likely causes of environmental change. Other more sophisticated methodologies of vegetation sampling and analysis should also be employed and fed back into the research process in order to revise and construct theories of ecological dynamics more generally (see Sullivan 1997).

The sites described in this chapter have been chosen from my collection of 49 matched archival photos which illustrate the study area; the original images were found in the Namibian National Archives, in old copies of the *SWA Farmer*, *SWA Annual* and *The Blue Books* (Union of South Africa). Matches of these archival photos were made between 1994 and 1996. While the four matches discussed in this chapter are representative of the trends observed in the collection as a whole, overall site selection was necessarily arbitrary and limited. The time spans between matched photos are also variable making comparisons between sites that much more complex. Ideally, matched photographic studies should model the site sample criteria to specific long term research aims and vegetation sampling methods. Unfortunately for Namibian researchers, it is only recently that fixed point repeat photography has been built into long-term vegetation studies in Namibia (within the Department of Forestry) and the results of these will only become available in future decades.

#### *Methods of Producing Matched Photographs*

Locating the exact camera position from an archival photograph can be time consuming, but provided there are at least two identifiable landscape features such as rocks, hills, buildings or trees present, surprising site accuracy can be obtained through common sense triangulation. It is often useful to determine the time of day and season in which the archival photo



was made in order to obtain a more accurate match, but this is not crucial. Once the exact position of the original photo station has been determined it should be permanently marked with a cairn of stones or metal stake and its co-ordinates recorded with a Global Positioning System although accurate co-ordinates can be derived from 1:50,000 topographic maps. A sturdy tripod is essential for establishing the exact camera position and recording the camera height. By determining the centre of the original photo it is possible to align the centre of the image in the camera view finder to correspond with the original; a zoom lens is useful in replicating the original frame.

Standardised data sheets were drawn up to record date, time, position, grid reference, location maps, source and date of original photo, veld type and subject, soil types, geological features, landscape description and notes on major changes. A record of camera type, film type, focal length, f-stop, shutter speed and exact time helps when it comes to processing, documentation and storage of images<sup>4</sup>.

### *Photo Site Survey Methodology*

Photo sites typically covered areas ranging from 5 to 50 hectares. Where sites exhibited more than one distinct land form, soil type, biotic or management influence (drainage channels, sandy river beds, river banks, rocky slopes, rocky pediments etc.), regions based on these distinctions were defined. These regions were then surveyed by walking into the field of the image, recording each species encountered and making a subjective judgement of percentage species cover by region. While the focus of this research was primarily on woody vegetation<sup>5</sup>, dominant grasses and as many ephemeral species as possible were also recorded.

A second more detailed survey was then conducted using the matched photos. By numbering individual trees and shrubs in both images it was possible to compare the matches in detail by defining three classes of individual trees and shrubs: those present in both photos, recruits and those

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<sup>4</sup> Good examples of useful data sheets are shown in Rogers *et al* 1984; Hoffman *et al* 1995. See Appendix 3 for examples of data sheets used in this study. A full set of matched photographs and data sheets will be permanently lodged at the National Botanical Research Institute; Windhoek, Namibia.

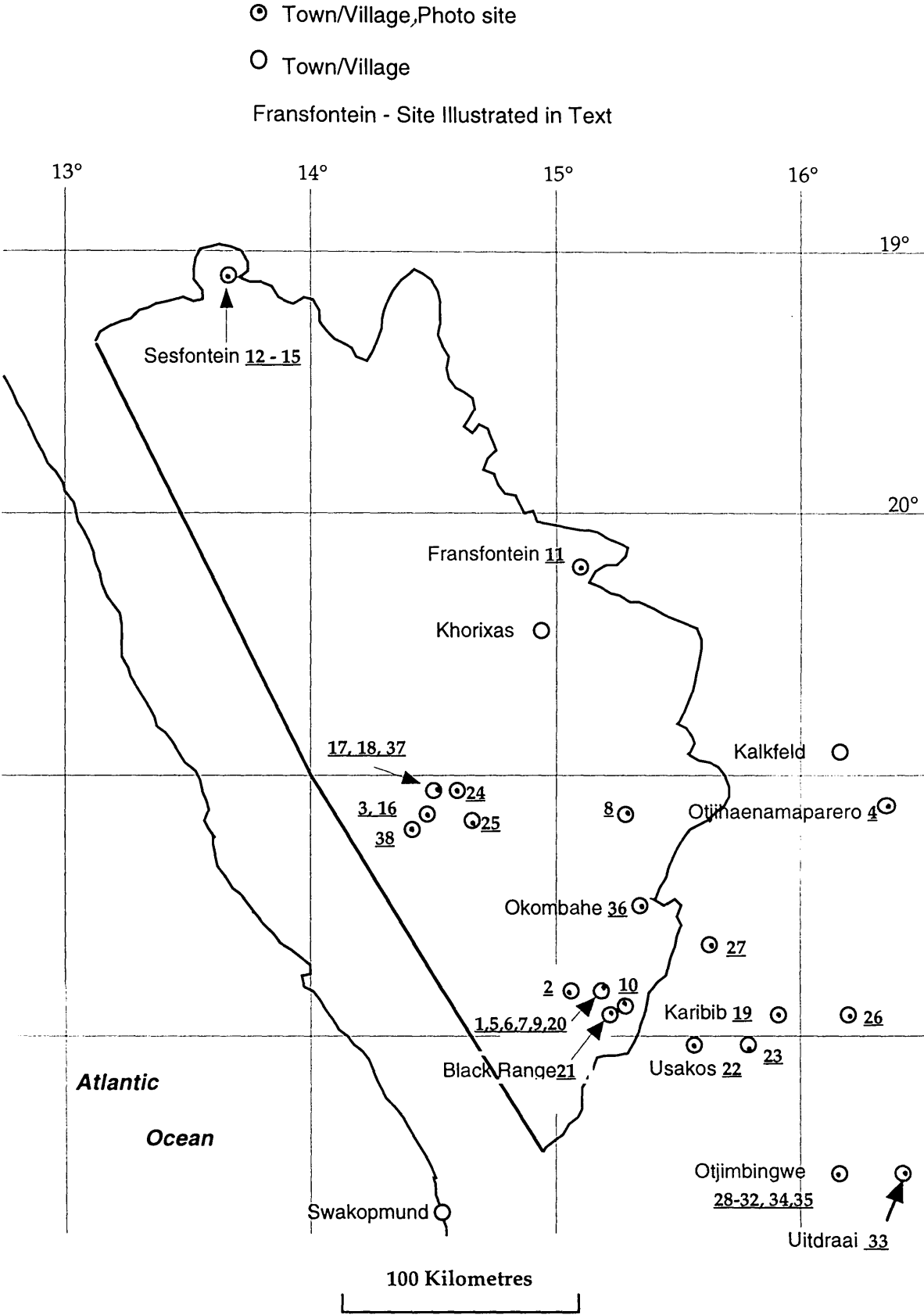
<sup>5</sup> "Woody vegetation" as used throughout this and the following chapter denotes phanerophytic trees and shrubs according to Raunkaier's life-form classification system (Kent & Coker 1992:29-30)

no longer present. Numbered individuals were then identified by species and notes on observed recruitment, age or senescence recorded.

A photograph records a relatively small pie-shaped slice of landscape and while the information it contains is of very high quality, it is necessarily limited in interpreting broader trends in the environment: what is seen adjacent to or outside of the photo image is sometimes at variance with changes observed inside the frame of the image. For instance, it might be observed that the mortality and recruitment of a particular species was markedly different in adjacent areas due to changes in alluvial drainage channels; this variation was quantified by walking transects through the respective regions and recording height classes and senescence. Where a fence line is adjacent to a site, it might (if the management history is known) be used as a control to record differences in species cover, size, recruitment etc. By identifying individual trees or shrubs present in both images, it was also possible to gain insight into species morphology: it is a revelation to discover that a particular *Boscia foetida* hardly changed over an interval of 100 years; to identify an *Acacia reficiens* as a young recruit in 1930 and find it partially senescent in 1995; to observe an area completely devoid of trees in 1876 now almost obscured by *Faidherbia albida* and *Acacia tortilis* ; or to see the die-back exhibited by an *Acacia erioloba* and subsequent regrowth over a short climatic cycle of 35 years. Such clues as to species life history, coupled with climatic and land-use history are crucial to understanding ecosystem dynamics.

On its own, matched photography provides important historical insights but a detailed analysis and interpretation of vegetation change is only as good as the information brought to bear from other sources such as controlled vegetation sampling, rainfall data, satellite imagery, traveller's records and histories of land use. As a non-specialist, combining historical evidence in this way enabled me to pose questions about environmental dynamics. I hope that by putting some of this photographic evidence into the public domain I will encourage a reappraisal of the extent and causes of environmental degradation in this part of Namibia, with all the implications this has for development policy and land tenure reform.

# MAP # 5 - GROUND PHOTO SITES WITHIN AND ADJACENT TO DAMARALAND



## Matched Photographs from Four Sites

For the purposes of this chapter, four matched photographs have been selected from a total of 49 matches used in my study. These illustrate four major site categories and include: 1) open savannah transition rangeland; 2) communal settlements; 3) ephemeral rivers; 4) commercial farms (see Map # 5). I have been able to collect a number of archival photos for locations such as Sesfontein, Brandberg, Spitzkoppe, Karibib and Otjimbingwe. These clusters of images often span several decades and have been taken from different angles in varying habitats, making it possible to construct a detailed pattern of change over time and space. The matched photographs presented here were chosen on criterion of image clarity, accuracy of site matches and their general representativeness of changes observed in various site categories.

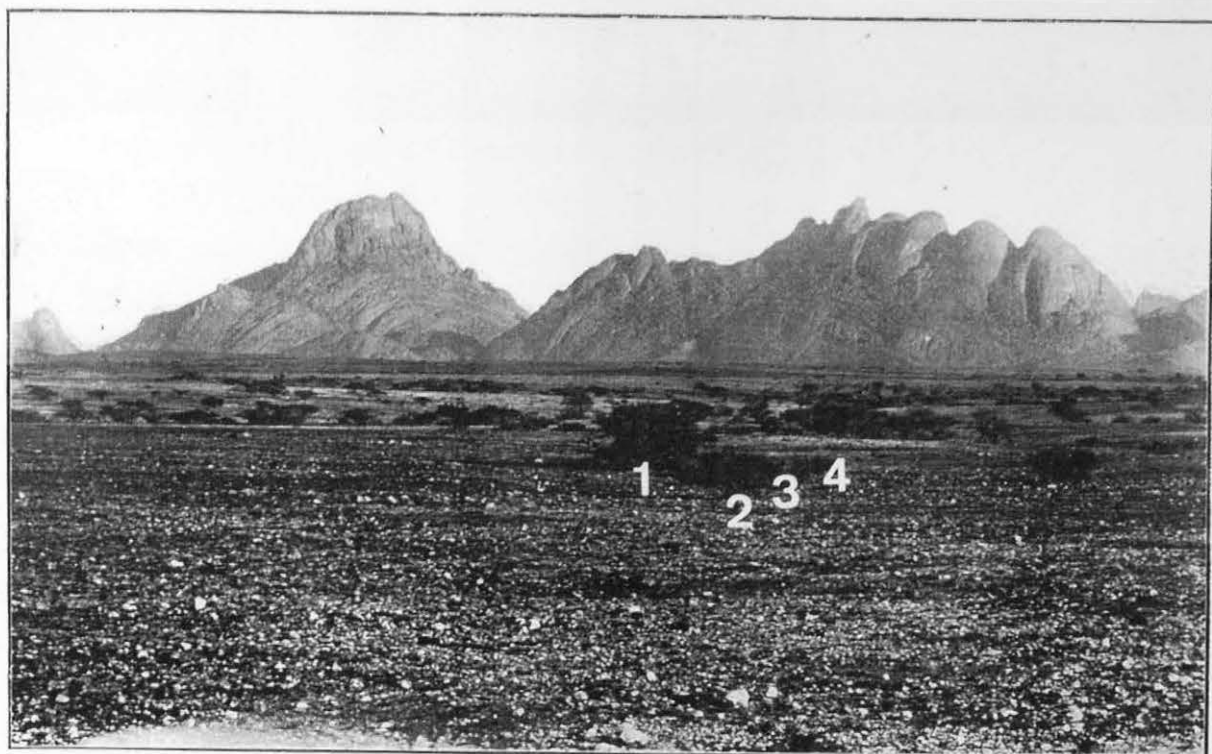
### Spitzkoppe & Black Range

The photo station in Figures 6a and 6b is located 12 kilometres south-east of Gross Spitzkoppe (Black Range Farm) in an area defined as Semi-desert and Savanna Transition by Giess (1971) and as part of the Nama Karoo Biome by Irish (1994). Rainfall is approximately 100mm per year with a coefficient of variation (CV) in excess of 60%.

The two photos demonstrate a significant increase in woody vegetation during the last sixty-five years. Tree and shrub cover is dominated by *Acacia reficiens*; other woody vegetation includes *Boscia foetida*, *Commiphora sp.* and *Maerua parvifolia*. *Acacia tortilis* and *A. erioloba* are both present in larger water courses outside of the frame of the image. The contrast in grass cover is indicative of the response of annual species to extremes of rainfall.

Four individuals from the first photo were positively identified. The largest *Acacia reficiens* (#1) is now partially senescent and indicates an age of 80 years plus. Another *Acacia reficiens* (#2) has been coppiced (probably by a communal farmer for use as house or kraal building material) and shows vigorous regrowth. The evenly distributed height-class structure of other *Acacia reficiens* suggests that new recruitment has been rapid and steady since the 1930s. The *Boscia foetida* (#3) is now about double in size (1 metre high, 1.5 metres across). Individual #4 is now a mature *Acacia reficiens*.





BERGE OP DIE GRENSE VAN DIE NAMIBWOESTYN.

Fig. 6a Looking north-west to Spitzkoppe from Black Range, circa 1930. First published in Blue Book (Union of South Africa 1931). *Acacia reficiens*, *Boscia foetida*.

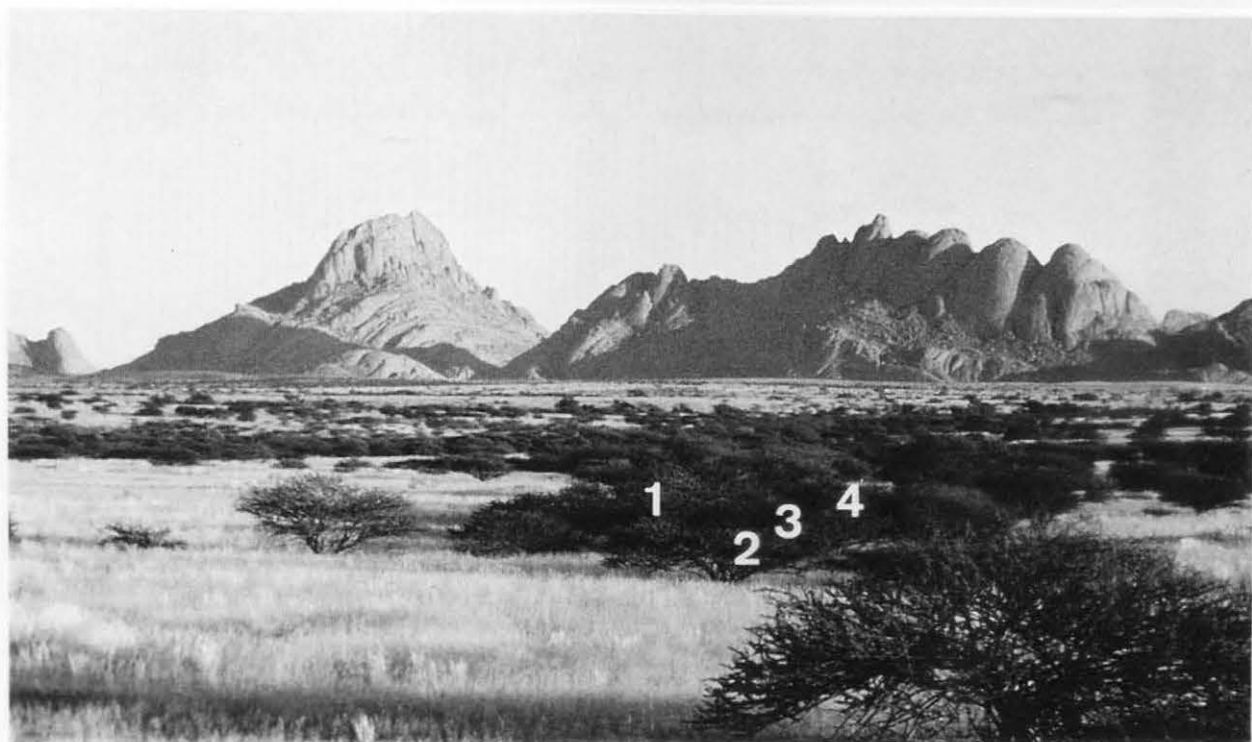


Fig 6b Matched photo (camera position 2 meters higher than Fig. 6a in order to obtain clear view). 21° 53' 50" S; 15° 15' 40" E. April 27, 1995; 7:00am. Foreground grasses are dominated by *Stipagrostis uniplumis* (25%), *S. ciliata* (4%), *S. hirtigluma* (3%), *Fingerhuthia africana* (3%), *Stipagrostis obtusa* (1%), other grasses (<1%) include: *Schmidtia kalarhiensis*, *Eragrostis nindensis*, *E. trichophora*, *Aristida adscensionis*, *Triraphis purpurea* and *Enneapogon* sp.. Woody vegetation is primarily *Acacia reficiens* (7%), *Boscia foetida* (<1%), *Commiphora* sp. (<1%); other low woody shrubs and ephemerals (<1% or rare) include: *Maerua parvifolia*, *Monechma* sp., *Petalidium lanatum*, *Hirpicium gorteroideis*, *Geigaria* sp., *Zygophyllum* sp., *Chamaesyce glanduligera*.

Both species are important to small stock, especially goats, in the absence of more easily browsed and grazed ephemeral species.<sup>6</sup>

Presently, the area is communal farm land. Three stock posts to the north, east and south east are situated within 2 to 4 kilometres from the photo site. Prior to 1970, these stock posts were occupied by commercial farmers who settled here in 1940 when Black Range and surrounding farms were first surveyed (Namibian National Archives: LAN 1340).<sup>7</sup>

The absence of grass cover in 1930 illustrates the stochastic nature of this environment which was drought stricken at the time: rainfall in Karibib, Okombahe and Otjimbingwe during the season of 1929-30 was 20 - 30% of long-term averages and marked the nadir of the six year drought between 1928 and 1933. During the drought of 1991-92 (rainfall 40% of average), the landscape around Spitzkoppe was similarly denuded of ephemeral grasses and it was commonly assumed by both nature conservators and agricultural advisors that this was a symptom of degradation occurring as a result of poor management and overgrazing (Biedler & Loutit 1994). Three years later with a return to long-term rainfall averages, the veld condition was transformed and exhibited a wide variety of palatable grass species. While there is no way of knowing how the response and species composition of grasses has changed, this at least illustrates that dry periods in the past resulted in denuded landscapes similar to those observed in the recent past.

Several factors could account for the dramatic increase of *Acacia reficiens* which is commonly used as an indicator species for bush encroachment (Kambatuku 1994:107). Extrapolations of rainfall data from adjacent rainfall stations (Usakos, Karibib, Okombahe) provide evidence that a significant increase in long-term rainfall averages did occur in this area during the twentieth century. The average in Karibib for the 30 years prior to 1930 was approximately 160mm rising to 215mm between 1931 and 1949 and then to 240mm between 1950 and 1980: an increase of 50%. Since 1980 the rainfall average has fallen back to levels recorded during the first 30 years of this century.

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<sup>6</sup> Although sheep are normally thought of as grazers and tend to utilise only grass species, when they are herded with goats in this environment they quickly learn to browse in much the same way as goats.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed description of this site based on repeat aerial photography, refer to Chapter 8, pages 353 to 382.

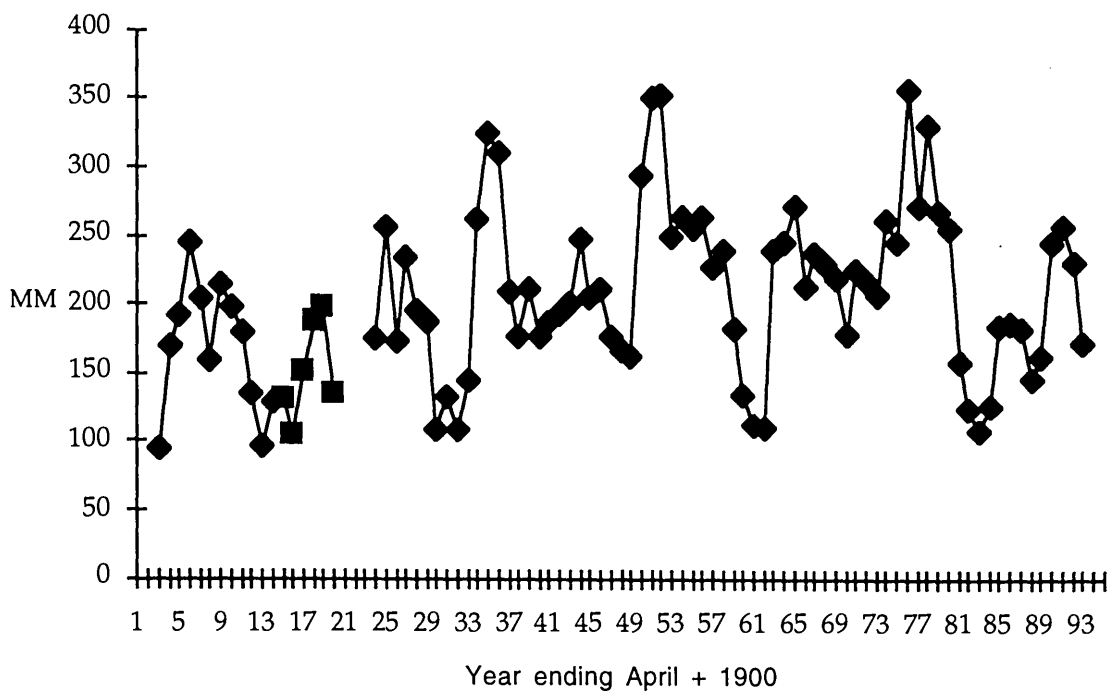


Fig. 7: Karibib annual rainfall (Okombahe rainfall interpolated for years 1915 - 1920).

It is likely that the sustained increase in rainfall during this century up to 1980 caused the shrub and tree species of the thorn bush savannah to increase in density up to 40 kilometres to the west - photographs of the Karibib area from around 1910 show a woody vegetation density which is similar to the plains surrounding Spitzkoppe today while thornbush density in Karibib has increased significantly during this century.<sup>8</sup> In 1874, Gerald McKiernan described Usakos as "the beginning of the grass country" on the edge of a treeless "desert tract" (1954: 37). Today, it lies well within the 'shrubby' Savanna Transition described by Giess (1971). Other photo sites in the vicinity of Spitzkoppe, Usakos, Karibib and the Erongo mountains confirm that bush thickening has taken place. There are also signs of recent extensive die-back of acacia especially in higher, topographically flat areas with few drainage channels, possibly indicating a reversal of the earlier westward recruitment trend. It could also be argued that the increase in *Acacia reficiens* is an indication of overgrazing and consequent bush encroachment occasioned by commercial and communal farmers. Whatever the cause, this increase can hardly be designated as dryland degradation resulting from bush encroachment in the case of Black Range: if anything, the increased shrub density on this western edge of the Savanna

<sup>8</sup> Matched photo # 23,24,25: see Appendix 4.

Biome indicates an increased production potential in the form of reserve grazing during dry periods when ephemerals are absent.

### Fransfontein

The site is within the Mopane Savanna vegetation type (Giess 1971) and falls within the 200-300mm isohyet band (Average 276mm; CV =36%).

Due to the panoramic quality of the photograph and the complex nature of the site, the site survey was broken into several regions based on topographical features (hill side = Region A; hill foot = B, spring area = C, settlement area = D and plains = E) as well as areas where significant changes were observed ('lager' area = L and plains adjacent to settlement). The main findings concerning woody vegetation are summarised in Figure 8b. A detailed survey of individual trees between the base of the hill and the road shows a significant increase in spite of an expanding settlement. The total tree and thorn bush population has more than doubled. Approximately 30% of the original population has died and 65% of those alive today have been recruited during the last 80 years. Tree numbers and density have also increased considerably around the fountain where additional recruits of *Ficus cordata* and *Acacia tortilis* have occurred. The pattern of change is even more pronounced in the lager area where the original clump of trees have died and a completely new group of recruits are now growing behind the original position.

The area of mid ground in the photo (hill foot, and plain surrounding the spring including the area of the German lager) shows dynamic recruitment of *Acacia tortilis*, *A. nilotica*, *A. reficiens* and *Colophospermum mopane*, the dominant tree species of this area, all of which are important sources of animal fodder, building material and firewood. Parts of the settlement are dominated by mature *C. mopane* but recruits occur in garden enclosures where they are protected from livestock during vulnerable early growth years. Species diversity within the settlement is low but increases dramatically outside a radius of 500 metres from the centre of the village, becoming consistent with species diversity in the larger landscape outside a 1 kilometre radius.





Fig. 8a: Namibian National Archives Photo No. 10770. "Fransfontein, P.O.W. lager for British soldiers" 1914-1915.



Fig. 8b: Matched photo (position exact) taken from hill looking WSW over Fransfontein. 21° 12' 25" S; 15° 01' 10" E. May 2, 1995, 1:40 pm. Hillside: *Terminalia prunioides* (25%), *Colophospermum mopane* (12%), *Grewia tenax* (10%), *Combretum apiculatum* (5%), *Commiphora glaucescens* (1%). Hill-foot to road: *Acacia tortilis* (18%), *Colophospermum mopane* (14%), *Acacia reficiens* (3%), *A. nilotica* (3%). Spring area: *Ficus cordata* (25%), *Acacia tortilis* (15%), *Euclea psuedebenus* (2%). Area of lager: *Acacia tortilis* (12%), *Colophospermum mopane* (10%), *Boscia albitrunca* (1%). Settlement and plains: *Boscia albitrunca*, *B. foetida*, *Colophospermum mopane*, *Maerua* spp., *Acacia tortilis* (not surveyed in detail).

One of the earliest recorded observations of the Fransfontein area was made by Charles Anderson on his abortive trip to the Kunene in 1857. He described the country to the south and east of Fransfontein as "thorn jungles... the bush was in some places so dense that a man on foot could not force a passage through it without having recourse to a hatchet" (Andersson 1861: 29). Closer to Fransfontein however "the county suddenly changed very much for the better. Both soil and vegetation were now different and our progress for some days was comparatively easy" (1861: 32).

It is doubtful that Anderson visited Fransfontein itself, but his diaries portray an area disrupted and depopulated by recent intense raiding between Herero and Nama pastoralists. Andersson vividly describes veld fires which he witnessed during this journey, between Fransfontein and Kamanjab:

...one of the finest illuminations I remember to have seen in Africa. The whole range facing us... exhibited one magnificent blaze of fire, kept vividly alive by a high wind. The flames crossed and chased one another like furies - here rising high above the inflamed substances, as if unsatisfied with their low prey and career - there rushing in snake like folds, as if writhing under some agonising torture - now smouldering for a moment as if gasping for breath, then shooting up into the heavens with redoubled vigour... (1861:38).

Such accounts typify a body of evidence which supports the conjecture that the deliberate burning of the veld in pre-colonial times was a common strategy of the pastoralists and hunters who inhabited this area, in much the same way as extensive burning is employed in the management of the extensive grazing lands of southern Ovamboland today.<sup>9</sup>

Fransfontein was permanently settled in 1882 by a group of Swartbooi Namas and has been continuously occupied since that time (Vedder 1938: 466). By the time the photo in Fig. 8a was taken, the German colonial authorities had occupied Fransfontein as a military post for 20 years under the terms of a so-called 'protective treaty'. The anthropologist Winifred Hoernlé visited Fransfontein eight years later in February 1923, observing that: "the pasturage round here is very poor; the cattle have eaten off every

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<sup>9</sup> The persistence of burning in the northern areas of Namibia is probably a result of the fact that these areas fell outside the settler 'police zone' in the south where burning practices were curtailed in the interests of white commercial farming.

green stick" (Hoernlé 1987: 127). She reported a population of 150 people, 400 cattle and 1900 sheep and goats.

The status of Fransfontein as a labour reserve was formalised by the South African administration during the 1920s and it served in this capacity, a small communal enclave surrounded by white commercial farms, until the late 1960s when it was incorporated into the expanded communal area of Damaraland. Today, the village of Fransfontein retains some of its status as a ward centre with schools, a clinic, several shops, churches and periodic livestock auctions. Several hectares of spring-fed gardens which have been under cultivation since the turn of the century are still in use and approximately 1,000 people live within the boundaries of the old reserve (National Planning Commission 1994). Twenty-one registered farmers live in or near the village keeping upwards of 100 cattle and 600 goats and within the old reserve 190 farmers own 2,500 cattle and over 9,000 goats and sheep (Agricultural Extension Service 1994).

The dynamics of vegetation change can partially be attributed to differing species morphologies: the slower growing trees such as *Boscia albitrunca* and mopane account for a smaller proportion of recruits than the shorter-lived acacias. Mopane around the settlement is distinctly larger and more mature than they were 80 years ago, which begs the question - why were there not more mature mopane trees in evidence then? Is it due to a more even age structure in the population of mopane at the turn of the century, or does the photo from 1915 show a landscape of young to 'middle-aged' recruits? What effect did the practice of burning the veld have on the species composition, density and recruitment during the 19th century; can we read the results of the cessation of this practice during the colonial period into the present picture?

The matched photos would seem to contradict the stereotypical belief that communal farming and in particular, densely populated communal settlements, cause irreversible environmental degradation. One might have expected to find the matched photograph demonstrating this by showing large areas denuded of tree cover as a result of overutilization and over grazing. Less visible signs of land degradation, such as decreased species diversity, have undoubtedly occurred but to a surprisingly small extent considering the history of this dense settlement. Other indicators of degradation such as declines in grass species diversity and density might only be inferred from controlled vegetation sampling.

## Otjimbingwe

Otjimbingwe is within the area defined as Semi-desert and Savanna Transition by Giess (1971) and as Nama Karoo Biome by Irish (1994).<sup>10</sup> The rainfall average is 165mm but this has varied from 140mm during the German period, to 200mm between 1930 and 1980, falling to 110mm during the last 15 years. The coefficient of variation during these periods has fluctuated between 38 - 66% averaging 45%.

Four distinct regions of vegetation can be described in the matched photos (figs. 9a & 9b):

1.) The immediate foreground which now has fewer trees and shrubs (predominantly *Acacia tortilis* and *Pechuel-loeschea leubnitziae*) with only one tree (*Boscia albitrunca*) positively identified in both photos (#1), although tentative matches might be made for #2 & #3 (*Acacia tortilis*);

2.) the flat open area around the church and buildings in 1910 is now colonised by mature *Acacia tortilis* and younger recruits;

3.) the area adjacent to the Swakop River supporting Prosopis, Date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*), Fan palms (*Hyphaene ventricosa*) and Ana trees (*Faidherbia albida*) shows a significant increase in tree density;

4.) the south bank and distant plains supported a matrix of shrubs (< 2m) and woody perennials (probably *Pechuel-loeschea lubnitziae*) in 1910; this low vegetation appears to have been replaced by larger trees and bushes (>2m), with significantly fewer woody perennials.

Evidence from earlier photos<sup>11</sup> taken in 1876 show that significant increases in woody vegetation have occurred on the surrounding plains, in the Swakop and Omusema Rivers and in the settlement itself. The sloping plains which flank these rivers show an increase in larger acacia species where low woody shrubs predominated in the past. One photo from 1950 indicates that tree cover on the plains to the south of the Swakop River has decreased slightly since that time possibly due to over-utilization attending settlement expansion during the past 45 years. Riverine vegetation has increased dramatically, due not only to the rapid spread of invasive alien species: photographic evidence combined with ground surveys point to a

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<sup>10</sup> This area was classified as rich grazing land comprising grassveld/shrub and grassveld/thorn tree at the turn of the century (Schultze 1914).

<sup>11</sup> See Namibian National Archives Photo # 2655 - 2658 & 2661 - 2663 for Palgrave's two panoramas of Otjimbingwe in 1876. See Appendix 4, Matched photo # 39 & 43.



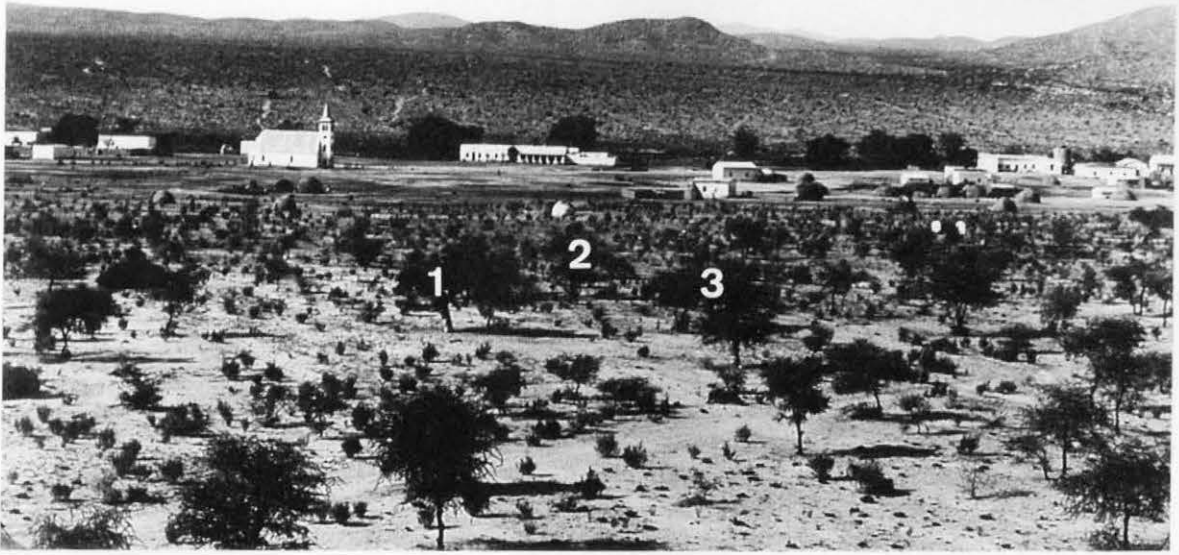


Fig. 9a: Namibian National Archives Photo No. 9423; "Otjimbingwe" [circa 1910].  
*Acacia tortilis*; *Faidherbia albida*; *Boscia albitrunca*; *Pechuel-loeschea lubnitzi*.



Fig. 9b: Matched photo (position exact) taken from koppe looking south over Otjimbingwe and Swakop River. 22° 21' 00" S; 16° 07' 20" E. November 21, 1995: 8:20 AM. Foreground to river: *Acacia tortilis* (3%); *Pechuel-loeschea lubnitzi* (1%); *Boscia albitrunca* (rare). River: *Prosopis* sp. (28%); *Pheonix reclinata* (18%); *Faidherbia albida* (15%); *Hyphaene petersiana* (7%); *Pechuel loeschea lubnitzi* (5%); *Tamarix usneoides* (1%); *Acacia erioloba* (<1%), *Eucalyptus* (<1%), *Acacia tortilis* (rare), *Ziziphus mucronata* (rare).

general transition from patches of *Tamarix usneoides* to thick stands of *Faidherbia albida*, *Acacia erioloba* and *A. tortilis* on the river banks, all native species.

This trend is replicated upstream on the commercial farm of Uitdraai<sup>12</sup> although the increase in riverine tree density here is less pronounced probably due to deeper ground water. The foreground of the matched photo (Fig. 9b) is the only example which I have found out of eleven matched photos of Otjimbingwe between the dates of 1876 and 1920, which shows a definite decrease in tree cover within the settlement. This is undoubtedly taking place in other parts of the settlement as a result of building and development but does not in itself support claims of degradation in the wider landscape.

It is difficult to analyse vegetation change from descriptive historical accounts but the following extracts illuminate two essential features of the Otjimbingwe environment: the physical dynamism associated with the Swakop River and the land's dynamic response to low and variable rainfall. In 1852 Francis Galton commented on the perennial surface water in the bed of the Swakop River at Otjimbingwe; a feature which accounts for the existence of Otjimbingwe as a settlement in both pre-colonial and colonial times. "Grass... is also in abundance, for the Swakop, at this place... runs through a wide plain, that shelves for miles down to its bed; and which, though covered in thorn bushes, affords a fair allowance of grass-bearing soil" (Galton 1853:59). In November 1860, James Chapman noted that "at Otjimbingwe hardly any rain has fallen during the last two years, in consequence of which there is not a blade of grass to be seen, and the bare trees and bushes appear miserably scorched" (Chapman 1886: 383). Five months later, he described his trek from Otjimbingwe to Gross Barman as follows:

The country was still as parched and bare as it was to the west. [Our cattle] could find neither grass nor water, in a country where we have seen grasses and herbs growing in the greatest exuberance when rains favoured the earth in the proper seasons, and where now cattle grubbed with their snouts in the dust for the roots of grasses that had long since been devoured or had crumbled." [But thirty miles from Otjimbingwe] ... the earth, which hitherto had been baked and barren, was here covered with a profusion of green grass, bright flowers and

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<sup>12</sup> See Palgraves panorama of Uitdraai; Namibian National Archives photo nos.: 2661 - 2663. See Appendix 4: Photo Site # 42. Also refer to Chapter 8, pages 341 - 343.

odiferous herbs. The acacias and mimosas, which before showed scanty, drooping, withered foliage... were here expanded by grateful showers to their full freshness and greatest vigour (1886: 399).

Veld conditions were also recorded by Charles Anderson who lived here during the early 1860's: "Weather very hot. No signs of rain: Otjimbingwe looks like a desert" (February 18 1860); "A terrific sand-storm passed over us, doing some damage to the store roof" (January 20 1862). And after a month of rain and improving veld conditions: "A second crop of yellow flowers are appearing" (March 19, 1862) indicating the wide-spread occurrence of *Tribulus*, commonly referred to as an indicator of disturbance associated with over-grazing (Andersson 1989). He also describes the Swakop in flood near Gross Barman:

The storm did not last above half-an-hour; but this short time was sufficient to convert the whole country into one sheet of water. The noise, moreover, caused by the river and a number of minor mountain streams, as they rolled down their dark, muddy torrents in waves rising often as high as ten feet, was perfectly deafening. Gigantic trees recently uprooted, and others in a state of decay, were carried away with irresistible fury, and tossed about on the foaming billows like so many straws (1856:100).

Baines' painting of "The Otjimbingwe Volunteer Artillery, 1864" depicts the banks and river bed as almost totally devoid of vegetation, and Palgraves' photos (1876) confirm this. During the second half of the 19th century Otjimbingwe was alternately a dust bowl and a lush prairie land, a settlement without shade situated in what would now undoubtedly be seen as an overgrazed and degraded environment. Environmental circumstances meant that ox-wagon trains were forced to pass along very specific routes on their way too and from Otjimbingwe. Mission chronicles, in detailing conditions along the route to Walvisbay, provide us with a graphic indication as to the density of traffic on some of the wagon trails:

It was a gruesome road. It was covered with ox bones. [. . .] The road could not be otherwise, as in one year 880 consignments were transported inland, of these over 500 passed Otjimbingwe. During the past year [1895] 10,000 - 12,000 oxen passed Otjimbingwe as draught animals. (ELCIN, V. Chroniken, Otjimbingwe quoted in Gewald 1996: 139)

The size of the cattle herds around Otjimbingwe at the start of the Rinderpest epizootic, in 1897 can be gleaned from the figures of inoculated cattle: some 6,178 cattle were inoculated with gall vaccine, out of which 2,731 died. (Gewald 1996: 144) Similar changes in stocking densities were recorded for Otjimbingwe reserve as a whole between 1990 and 1995 when LSUs fell from 8,000 to 3,900 at the depth of the most recent drought in 1993 and recovered to 7,000 by the end of 1995 (Unpublished report from the Directorate of Veterinary Services, Omaruru District: six-monthly census figures).

How, over the course of a century have the pasture lands surrounding Otjimbingwe been able to sustain such concentrations of livestock? Has it 'recovered' during the last 100 years from a 'degraded' state? Was this state a 'natural' one in the first place, or was it man induced? Is it unreasonable to view vegetation change as further confirmation of a general westward shift of the Nama-Karoo biome and subsequent colonisation by pioneer species of the Thornbush Savanna? In spite of increased ground water extraction and the construction of upstream dams, why has non-alien riverine vegetation increased to such an extent? Is there a direct correlation between the decrease in extreme episodic flooding and the dense tree colonisation of the river banks? If so, why did this process take place before the construction of the Swakoppoort Dam?<sup>13</sup>

Otjimbingwe is one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements in Namibia. It was the centre of mining, cattle trading and missionary activities during the mid to late nineteenth century. Since 1926 when the 'reserve' of Otjimbingwe was proclaimed, it has retained its present form, (expanding occasionally through the incorporation of adjoining commercial farms); a communal enclave of about 100,000 hectares - a rural ghetto surrounded by comparatively affluent white farmers. Otjimbingwe has been an active settlement for almost 150 years: the photographic evidence would again seem to contradict the received wisdom that over-utilization occasioned by sedentarization and so-called 'open access' tenure regimes leads to pronounced, irreversible land degradation (Africare 1994;

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<sup>13</sup> One theory suggests that the dropping water table as a result of upstream damming allows recruitment of tree species such as *Faidherbia albida*, and *Acacia erioloba*. Senescence occurs when the water table drops below the reach of tree roots, which in riverine tree species can be up to 30 metres deep (Peter Jacobson; pers comm. 1995).



Interconsult 1994; Ashley 1994; Corbett & Daniels 1996)<sup>14</sup>. Photos from other long-established communal settlements such as Fransfontein, Okombahe and Sesfontein also confound expectations of how vegetation has changed and this evidence demands that we re-examine our assumptions about human and livestock impacts on this semi-arid environment.

I am not suggesting that complacency should be the order of the day: Otjimbingwe faces tremendous social and economic problems. One of the most obvious environmental changes which has had an immediate impact on the ability of this communal population to sustain itself is the combination of damming, water extraction and low rainfall during the last 15 years leading to a severe depletion of surface water in the Swakop River at Otjimbingwe. It is now almost impossible to farm the once productive gardens which once lined the Swakop's banks<sup>15</sup>. How has this affected the social-economy of the communal settlement? To what extent will the combined effects of increased poverty and population growth influence the long-term sustainability of finite rangeland resources? Some of these questions can begin to be answered by studying more recent changes to rangeland vegetation through aerial photography, satellite images and detailed ground surveys comparing adjacent communal and commercial farmland.<sup>16</sup> Further environmental and socio-economic research (see Fuller 1993:35-65) might show that land degradation is a minor factor in the social and economic crisis facing the population of Otjimbingwe today, however, the evidence of matched ground and aerial photographs indicates that the depletion of woody vegetation in recent years is patchy and probably due to a number of complex factors in which climatic cycles play an important role.

### **Otjihaenamaparero**

The matched photographs from Figs. 10a and 10b depict Thornbush Savanna (Giess 1971) located approximately 65 kilometres north-east of Omaruru. Rainfall averages 375mm per year with a CV of 37% (nearest station: Kalkfeld 1940-1993).

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<sup>14</sup> The references cited are only a few examples taken from literature dealing specifically with the study area as well as documents concerned with environmental issues more generally in Namibia.

<sup>15</sup> Aerial photos taken in 1958 show more than 15 hectares of fenced gardens in the river bed and along the south bank of the Swakop.

<sup>16</sup> This is considered in more detail in Chapter 8.

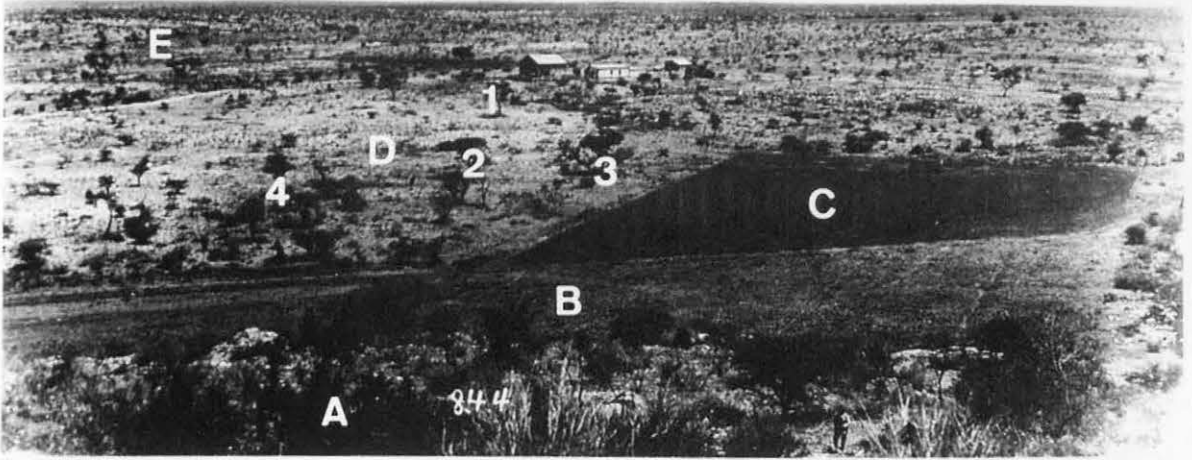


Fig 10a: Namibian National Archives Photo No. 1485. "Otjihaenamaparero Farm, Owned by Muhlenbruch, Omaruru District". Circa 1910.



Fig. 10b: Matched photo (camera position 8 metres in front of original photo station) taken from hill looking NW over Otjihaenamaparero farm post. 21° 02' 25" S; 16° 23' 25" E. July 4, 1994: 2:45 PM. Foreground (hill): *Dombeya rotundifolia* (8%); *Croton gratissimus* (7%); *Catophractes alexandri* (7%); *Acacia mellifera* (6%); *Rhus marlothii* (5%); *Commiphora* sp. (3%); *Lycium/Phaeoptilum* sp. (2%). Mid-ground: *Acacia hebeclada*: (Region B = 20%; C = 12%; D = 6%); *Acacia tortilis*: (B = 20%; C = 18%; D = 5%). *A. mellifera*: (B = 3%, C = 12%, D = 20%); *Ziziphus mucronata*: (B = 4%, C = 1%, D = 1%); *Catophractes alexandri*: (C = 7%) *Acacia erioloba*: (C = rare; D = <1%); *Prosopis* sp.: (B, C = rare, D = 1%).

The area has been privately owned and continuously farmed on a commercial basis during the twentieth century, primarily for cattle. The site provides a case study of the dynamics of vegetation response to various commercial management practices: land disturbance has varied from intensive cultivation and grazing to relatively undisturbed hill grazing (Region A). Unfortunately the detailed record of land management is not available to this analysis and although this site falls outside the focus of my study area, it is valuable here as an example of how photographic evidence can elucidate the processes of recolonisation of disturbed ground and also raises the question of 'bush encroachment' related to commercial cattle farming.

The photo from 1910 (fig. 10a) shows a landscape sparsely populated by regularly spaced low trees interspersed with more mature *Acacia erioloba*. There are now clear signs of bush thickening in all areas apart from the hill foreground which is largely unchanged (fig. 10b). The large trees situated in the mid-ground, between the photo station and the house (#1,2,3 & 4) are individuals or groups of *Acacia erioloba*. Most of these have survived into the present; new recruits of this species are rare.

Region C was probably cultivated most intensively judging by evidence of terracing and irrigation channels; *Acacia tortilis* is dominant with significantly lesser densities of *A. hebeclada* and *A. mellifera*. Region B was probably used for rainfed fodder crops such as Lucerne and possibly *Cenchrus ciliaris*. It is now equally dominated by older *Acacia tortilis* and *A. hebeclada*. These two cultivated areas contrast sharply with Region D which carries a high percentage of *Acacia mellifera* and significantly lower densities of *Acacia tortilis* and *A. hebeclada*; the area around the farm house is now dominated by *Prosopis sp.* There is a strong inverse correlation between disturbance and species diversity in all regions. Region E was not surveyed but the photographic evidence suggests that significant increases in shrub and tree density have occurred. All regions show a similar percentage of vegetation cover (49-58%), but the species composition in the most heavily disturbed sites is skewed in favour of larger acacia species. It would appear that *Acacia tortilis* is the first to colonise followed by *A. hebeclada* and then *A. mellifera*. Low deciduous shrubs such as *Catophractes alexandri* and *Monechma cleomiodes* have not colonised the cultivated areas, but are significant components of the grazed community in Region D.

The issue of bush encroachment in Namibia is usually discussed in relation to commercial ranching where production losses due to the replacement of perennial grasses by shrubs (such as *Acacia mellifera*) have reduced the carrying capacity of the land and hence its productive potential. It is claimed that 10 million hectares in the commercial farming area have been affected by bush infestation reducing output by 30% compared with 40-50 years ago (NAPCOD 1996). The causes of bush thickening are ascribed to the complex interaction between grazing management, climate, vegetation dynamics, frequency of fire and the exclusion of browsing animals (Bester 1993:16).

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to summarise the extensive research literature related to the process of bush encroachment, some studies in Ethiopian rangelands suggest that bush thickening constitutes a beneficial stage in a 60 to 100 year cycle of grazing induced vegetation change where pastoralists are forced to abandon over-grazed sites, providing an opportunity for these sites to recover through replenishment of soil fertility (Coppock 1993:51-55). This process is possibly one of the defining characteristics of the Thornbush Savanna, making it fundamentally different from the Savanna Transition further to the west. Historical accounts suggest that this cyclic process was already in evidence during the 19th century in parts of the Omaruru and Otjiwarongo Regions as a result of the combined impact of pastoralists' livestock and large populations of wild ungulates. Historical accounts show that while the Thornbush Savanna has thickened considerably, parts of this area were even then so dense with acacia as to make travelling a very arduous business.

In 1853 Andersson and Galton passed to the east of Mount Etjo on their journey north to Waterberg, remarking on the abundance of game and the presence of scattered pastoral Herero camps. From a vantage point 40 kilometres east of Otjihaenamaparero, Galton observed that to the north and west "the country appeared as one unbounded plain, only covered by brushwood" (Andersson 1856: 150). "There seemed to be no grass whatever upon it, but it was studded over with low bushes, while eastward the ground was covered with trees and grass" (Galton 1853:149). Galton's map designates the area immediately around "Otjinna ma parero" as 'broken and rugged ground' and tinted yellow to denote 'desert or barren ground'.

Andersson, describing the river east of Omaruru in 1857 "found the country pretty well stocked with giraffes, zebras, gnus, koodoos &c., and



had some very decent shooting" (1861: 72). He also mentions the presence of elephants. Gerald McKiernan travelled between Omaruru and Outjo in 1874 on a route 35 kilometres to the west of Otjihaenamaparero and described it as difficult to traverse because of dense thorn bush indicating that tree density was much thicker to the west of Otjihaenamaparero. He describes the Omaruru area as:

rough and in part mountainous, covered by a dense growth of mimosas, acacias and other thorn bearing trees and shrubs. The soil is stony and sandy but produces a crop of grasses in the rainy season equal to that of the prairies of America and furnishes pasturage for the numerous herds of the Damara [Herero] (McKiernan 1954: 43).

As with Andersson's and Galton's accounts, there is no way of knowing just how thick the bush was at that time, nor how many cattle and wildlife browsed there. By the time that McKiernan described the area, its wildlife had been decimated and pastoralism was soon to give way to intensive cattle ranching which has remained the dominant land use during the present century.

The evidence of the Otjihaenamaparero matched photos confirm what is generally known about trends in vegetation change in the commercial cattle areas of Namibia. They also provide additional insights about recruitment patterns in heavily disturbed sites, but the full implications of this information will perhaps only be realised within a larger study where a variety of similar sites can be brought together within a comparative research methodology. It seems likely that long-term selective grazing pressure by cattle, managed on a commercial basis, is the main cause of the general thickening of the veld but other factors such as climate, soil types and the history of stocking management must be analysed in order to determine the dynamics of bush thickening at Otjihaenamaparero.

It is indicative of commercial ranching systems generally that stocking densities on this farm have remained stable during the last decade in spite of several years of below average rainfall. Rainfall records from Kalkfeld and Omaruru do not show such pronounced long-term fluctuations in rainfall averages as they do further to the west: in comparison to these lower rainfall areas where fluctuations in 30 to 50 year rainfall averages are as high as 50%, the rainfall variation in the region of Otjihaenamaparero during the same cycles is between 15 and 20%. This fact raises the question of interpreting

vegetation change through the use of ecological models which differentiate between stable and unstable systems. However, before discussing such models, the four matched photographs illustrated in this chapter should be set within the context of the matched photo study as a whole.

### Analysis of 38 Matched Photos Sites

Out of a total of 49 matched photos situated within the study area of western Namibia, 38 distinct photo sites were selected and analysed for changes in tree and shrub cover<sup>17</sup>. Each photo site was categorised by vegetation type, land-use history, geophysical characteristics and time span between the original photo and the match and according to whether or not an increase, decrease or no change in vegetation cover had occurred.

Table 1: Criteria used in evaluation of matched photographs.

Vegetation Type	Land-use History	Geophysical Type	Time Span	Change in Density
Semi-desert & Savanna Transition	Heavily Disturbed	Flat Plains with little run-off	Before 1950	Increase
Mopane Savanna (Transition)	Moderate Disturbance (grazed)	Plains with run-off	After 1950	Decrease
Thornbush Savanna	Undisturbed Control	Rocky Hills		No change
		Riverine Habitats		

<sup>17</sup> Several sites are comprised of multiple photos either as panoramas, or overlapping views. Several matched photos were disregarded due to uncertainty regarding the date of the original photo, poor photo clarity and inaccurate match or lack of detailed survey information.

*Correlating vegetation type, land-use, geophysical characteristics and time with vegetation change*

Thirty one photo sites were located within the Semi-Desert and Savanna Transition, 6 within the Mopane Savanna and 1 within the Thornbush Savanna vegetation types as defined by Giess (1971). However, the difficulty of categorising and mapping the vegetation in this western transition zone is illustrated by comparing Giess's map to that of Irish (1994) who defines vegetation in terms of biome categorization based on dominant life forms and climate. Several apparent anomalies arise due to the presence of vegetation outliers such as the Brandberg and Spitzkoppe, the fact that Giess makes no allowance for a transition zone between the desert and the Northern mopane savanna (e.g. around Sesfontein) as well as the difficulty in defining precise boundaries in vegetation types. In both systems of classification however, the majority of sites fall into a 50 to 100 kilometre wide band running adjacent to and directly to the east of the Namib Desert, labelled either Semi-desert Savanna Transition or Nama-Karoo:

**Table 2: Categories of photo site by vegetation type as defined by Giess (1971) and Irish (1994).**

	<b>Desert Biome</b>	<b>Nama-Karoo Biome</b>	<b>Savanna Biome</b>	<b>Total - Giess</b>
<b>Semi-desert, Sav. Trans.</b>	2	21	8	31
<b>Mopane Savanna</b>	0	4	2	6
<b>Thornbush Savanna</b>	0	0	1	1
<b>Total - Irish</b>	2	25	11	38

Seventy-one percent of photo sites showed an increase in woody vegetation cover, 16% showed no substantial change and 13% showed a decrease. As might be expected, the sites which showed least change in woody cover were either very sparsely wooded western grasslands, rocky hill environments or the more stable and long-lived Mopane woodlands. The

most dynamic changes occurred either adjacent to water courses and rivers or at sites disturbed by humans and/or livestock.

Due to the small sample size it is difficult to isolate trends in vegetation change related to veld types, land-use or geophysical conditions. However, only 25% of sites classed as 'heavily disturbed' and 17% of sites classified as 'moderately disturbed (grazed)' showed decreases or no change. All of these sites fell within the 'Transition' zone (incorporating semi-desert transition, savanna transition and mopane transition). Forty-five percent of these sites were situated on plains adjacent to land features with run-off.

Fourteen of the 18 disturbed sites are located in or adjacent to one of the following settlements: Otjimbingwe, Karibib, Spitzkoppe, Okombahe, Fransfontein and Sesfontein; the remaining disturbed sites include a railway bridge near Usakos, the abandoned German trading post at Spitzkoppe, a farm dam in the Otjohorongo Reserve, and Otjihaenamaparero farm post. All but four of these eighteen photo sites have been continuously disturbed and fifteen of these show significant increases in tree cover.

**Table 3: Categories of photo sites by land-use and change in woody vegetation cover.**

	increase	no change	decrease	total
<b>control sites</b>	3	3	2	8
<b>disturbed</b>	15	1	2	18
<b>grazed</b>	9	2	1	12
<b>total</b>	27	6	5	38

It would be reasonable to expect that heavily disturbed sites would show signs of recovery and recruitment after disturbance (such as human settlement, cultivation or intensive grazing) ceased: only four of the eighteen disturbed sites fall into this category. It is surprising however that only three of the disturbed sites show decreases or no change in tree and shrub



cover - these three sites have been analysed using matched photos where the original photo was taken after 1950.

The average time lapse of all matched photos showing a decrease or no change in vegetation cover is 43 years, the average time lapse for all matches showing an increase in woody vegetation is 71 years. A few photo sites fall outside of this general trend but these exceptions tend to strengthen the observation that up until the mid-twentieth century, tree cover increased significantly while after 1950 tree density has tended to decrease.

**Table 4: Photo Sites where original photo was made before or after 1950, correlated with increased tree cover and stable or decreased tree cover.**

	Increase in Tree Cover	No change or Decrease
<b>Before 1950</b>	19	0
<b>After 1950</b>	8	11

Exactly half of the original photos were taken before 1950; the matches of these photos all show an increase in tree and shrub cover. However, only eight out of the nineteen photos which match originals taken after 1950 show an increase. Four of these are situated in the dry western extreme of the study area on the 100 mm isohyet, two of these are control sites at Brandberg which show an overall increase in woody vegetation but also reveal extensive recent die-back, especially of *A. reficiens* as do two other relatively undisturbed sites on the western edge of the thorn shrub savanna near Spitzkoppe. Two of the eight sites depict the dynamic riverine environments of the Omaruru and Ugab Rivers which show rapid change and increased tree cover (even within the densely populated communal settlement of Okombahe), and two views of the abandoned gardens of Sesfontein Fort and surrounding plains (these communal gardens were abandoned only 20 years ago) show vigorous colonisation by *Acacia tortilis*. These eight exceptions fall into three categories: 1) sites which have been heavily disturbed and then left to recover; 2) river environments and 3) controls and sites on the western margin of the study area which show conflicting trends in recruitment and senescence of woody vegetation probably due to the short time span (35 years) between the matched photos.

The eleven matched photos which show a decrease or no change in woody cover, all span a time of less than 45 years prior to 1995. It is difficult to ascribe these changes to any one factor such as land-use, vegetation type, climate or geophysical characteristics since no clear trend can be correlated to any one set of variables. The small sample size coupled with the short time span between the matched photos places limitations on what conclusions might be drawn from this analysis. However, it is interesting to note that of the eleven sites showing no change or a decrease in woody cover only three of these are situated in heavily disturbed permanent settlements, three others are sporadically grazed sites and the remainder are controls: indicating that other factors than the impacts of humans and livestock must account for observed changes in woody vegetation.

All sites showing a decrease or no change in woody vegetation density are situated in the western Semi-desert Savanna Transition zone and in the Nama-Karoo Biome as it extends into the Mopane Savanna to the north. Over 90% of these are also situated on plains, or plains adjacent to land features which produce run-off. By refining the vegetation classification of the Semi-desert Savanna Transition and extending its range into the Mopane Savanna zone as an extension of the Nama-Karoo Biome, the correlation between sites with decreases or no change and the western edge of this vegetation zone becomes evident.

**Table 5: Correlation between vegetation zones and geophysical characteristics of sites showing a decrease or no change in tree and shrub density.**

	Plains	Plains with run-off	Rocky hills	Rivers
<b>Semi-desert Transition</b>	2	4	1	0
<b>Savanna Transition</b>	1	1	0	0
<b>Mopane Transition</b>	2	0	0	0

In summary, an overall increase in woody vegetation has occurred and is strongly correlated with (1) site disturbance caused by either dynamic river habitats or human settlements; and (2) with matched photos that span a time period longer than 45 years. Decreases in woody vegetation are associated with (1) short time spans between matched photos; (2) the

'transition zone' between savanna and desert vegetation systems; and (3) sites which fall into the geophysical categories of 'plains' and 'plains with run-off'.

## Conclusions

The interactions of several dynamic variables make a definitive conclusion as to the causes of vegetation change difficult. However, several conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing analysis of matched ground photo sites:

1.) Stability and dynamic change in vegetation density is directly correlated with vegetation types, geophysical characteristics and hydrological systems: savanna systems supporting long-lived mopane and vegetation communities supported by rocky substrates are highly stable while woody vegetation supported by sandy substrates on plains in the transition zone, dominated by *Acacia tortilis* and *A. reficiens* are dynamic; riverine systems are highly dynamic.

2.) Disturbance has a weak correlation to decreases in vegetation density, but is strong, especially in relation to the recruitment and regeneration of fast-growing tree species.

3.) Savanna, Semi-desert and Savanna Transition and Riverine systems are all highly resilient insofar as human and livestock induced vegetation density decreases are *reversible*, often over relatively short periods of time.

4.) The overall causes of vegetation change cannot be attributed directly to the impacts of humans and livestock. Evidence that climatic cycles play a decisive role in long-term vegetation change is intimated by the historical contextualisation of two photo sites (Black Range and Otjimbingwe). The hypothesis that tree and shrub ranges have moved by up to 40 kilometres to the west during the 20th century in response to climate change will be explored at greater length in the following chapter.

One of the most obvious conclusions which can be drawn from this study is that disentangling the influences of climate, land-use, vegetation type and geophysical variables relating to local and regional vegetation change is highly complex. This can be attributed to two aspects of this methodology. On the one hand, matched photographic records of long term vegetation change provide a wealth and quality of detail unrivalled by any other long-term source. On the other hand, this methodology has definite limitations when it comes to interpreting directional vegetation changes and

regional shifts of plant ranges. For instance, this collection of matched photos depicts a very tiny proportion of the total area under consideration and in most instances, the photographic view is narrow. The original photos were made for other purposes than studying vegetation change and therefore have no methodological consistency in terms of either a random or stratified sampling strategy; as a consequence, the sample is dominated by photo sites which are, or have been, disturbed. While general land-use histories are often available for these sites, the details of stocking rates and specific farming methods are often unknown and controls within these highly disturbed areas do not exist.

Part of the difficulty then, is to disentangle the causes of what appear to be random and inconsistent changes. In the short term, and on a local level, random fluctuations of rainfall could conspire to promote the recruitment of a specific species of shrub or tree which might then affect the composition of the vegetation community for many decades (Hoffman, Barr & Cowling 1990:463; Sullivan 1997:19). A single massive flood can change the vegetation profile of riparian woodlands overnight (Jacobson *et al* 1995:39). In the long term, the absence of large herds of wild ungulates or the suppression of regular veld fires might alter the structure and extent of vegetation cover considerably (Bahre 1991:129-142). Add long-term climate change and increasing human impacts into the equation and we are faced with a task of immense complexity. In the following chapter I will attempt to unpick this tangled skein by using other data and analytic methods which compliment this basic photographic evidence: aerial photography, rainfall records and land-use histories.

### *Theoretical considerations*

The illustrated matched photos and the collection from which they are drawn represent a small but significant sample which elicit relevant questions about environmental change. Change must be accounted for by a combination of factors including climate, vegetation type and human impacts involving different management regimes and resource use. It is only by contextualizing the photos within the historical evidence of these influences that we can begin to understand the causes of change.

Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin 1968) is not a model which sits easily with the evidence from Otjimbingwe, Spitzkoppe, Okombahe,



Fransfontein and Sesfontein. These communal areas are often discussed as if they were 'open access regimes' lacking internal traditional controls or external bureaucratic regulation. All of the communal settlements illustrated by the matched photographs are typified by large fluctuations of both human and livestock populations due to cycles of drought: sedentarization in these western communal areas is more fluid and complex than is generally assumed. Commercial cattle farming on the other hand is typified by highly stable livestock populations. There are also subtle but significant differences in the climate and vegetation communities of present day communal and commercial areas in Western Namibia: it is misleading to lump these areas together within one standardized ecological or management model. This has enormous implications in interpreting change across the gradations of non-equilibrium ecosystems illustrated in the matched photographs.

New paradigms of semi-arid and arid ecology are emerging as a result of a reappraisal of the relevance of concepts such as 'vegetation succession' and 'carrying capacity', in particular by focusing on the differences between so-called 'equilibrium' and 'non-equilibrium' environments (Behnke, Scoones & Kerven 1993, Scoones 1994). The distinction between these two ideal types of environment are often blurred as one type graduates into another. Clearer conceptual distinctions within this model which take account of differences in climate, the dynamics of particular vegetation communities and farming systems are needed in order to develop appropriate land management policies. Other models of vegetation change such as 'state and transition' (Westoby *et al.* 1989; Milton and Hoffman 1994) or 'pulses of migration' (Dean *et al.* 1995) are variations which fit within this general paradigm. This is not the place to elaborate ecological theory, but the interpretation of the photos will not be complete until they are set within the context of such current debates. These have the potential to influence the future of Namibia's social, economic and political development, especially in regard to land reform and natural resource management. The alternative perspectives which arise from recent research into rangeland ecology suggest that communal farmers are adept at practising 'opportunistic' resource management attuned to non-equilibrium ecological conditions: "they emphasize working with and building on the ecological knowledge and skills of Africa's farmers and herders; the very skills often rendered

invisible by neo-Malthusian degradation narratives" (Leach & Mearns 1996:29).

Recent development and policy rhetoric in Namibia has tended to identify communal land tenure as a major cause of desertification (NAPCOD 1996, *National Agricultural Policy*, Republic of Namibia 1995d). There is little evidence to support this argument in the western communal areas of Otjimbingwe and former Damaraland. "Without security of tenure [in communal areas], the incentive and opportunity to manage renewable natural resources in a sustainable manner is significantly reduced" (NAPCOD 1996:17) reiterates a legitimate concern amongst rural planners but perhaps misses the point in the case of these western arid lands. Here, communal farmers survive precisely because issues related to security of tenure are integrally linked to the need for mobility; progress towards sustainable development requires a recognition and strengthening of this informal and flexible system of tenure and land management which shows few signs degrading or 'desertifying' this environment.

## CHAPTER 8

### THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT: CHAOS, COMPLEXITY OR COLLAPSE?

Crisis narratives are the primary means whereby development experts and the institutions for which they work claim the rights of stewardship over land and resources they do not own. By generating and appealing to crisis narratives, technical experts and managers assert rights as 'stakeholders' in the land and resources they say are under crisis.

Emery Roe (1995: 1066)<sup>1</sup>

The very concept of an external 'environment', analytically separable from society, can be traced to post-Enlightenment thought in the North.

Leach & Mearns in *The lie of the land* (1996: 11)

Separating the impacts of humans and livestock on the environment, from the effects of climatic events and 'natural' processes, is inextricably linked to the problem of monitoring changes in vegetation in an efficient and meaningful way (Stafford & Pickup 1993: 196). This chapter attempts to address the difficulty inherent in assessing woody vegetation change in the arid environment of western Namibia. The environment is dynamic and complex - the effects of drought and floods, pastoralism, colonialism and commercial farming have all played a part in shaping an ecology which can be characterised as a non-equilibrium system (Behnke *et al* 1993). The interactions of stochastic rainfall events, fluctuating livestock and human populations, at different temporal and spatial scales, creates a level of empirical complexity which can border on chaos when it comes to defining the underlying causes of vegetation change or predicting the future.

In Damaraland, as in many other parts of dryland Africa, predictions of impending environmental collapse have punctuated the historical record and shaped 'development' interventions, often with dire consequences for the pastoral societies affected (Leach & Mearns 1996:6-28; Sullivan 1996a:1). Recent research into dryland ecosystem dynamics suggests that dryland non-equilibrium systems actually depend on such unpredictable complexity in order to maintain health and resilience (Holling 1986) and that the social and cultural factors which enable pastoralists to survive in this

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Reij, C. I. Scoones & C. Toulmin (1996:3).

unpredictable environment are as complex as the climatic and biotic factors which overdetermine the functioning of such ecosystems.

Scientific and technical debates surrounding the issue of dryland ecology and pastoral development are beginning to find their way into contemporary social and environmental legislation in Namibia (Republic of Namibia 1993; 1994; 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; 1995d; 1996). And yet, in spite of the advances which this entails in terms of 'appropriate' or 'sustainable' development, such policies continue to be deployed in much the same fashion as previous interventions based on commercial ranching models of rangeland management: the 'anti-politics machine' (Ferguson 1990) of environmental policy lacks empirical grounding in locally specific case studies. The purpose of this chapter is to present such case studies of environmental change. The responsiveness of policy makers to emerging models of ecosystem dynamics will be alluded to in the conclusion of this thesis - the research presented in this chapter is a necessary prerequisite to discussing the political implications of social, economic and cultural factors which, combined with an understanding of Damaraland's environmental history, might contribute to the formation of policies which take account of local variations within the national context.

### **Matched Aerial Photography**

The use of matched aerial photography as a method for measuring vegetation change has several advantages over matched ground photography because vertical aerial photos depict continuous ground cover which can be measured and compared planimetrically in a regional frame of either random or stratified samples. However, analysis is restricted by the interval between repeat photos, which in the case of Damaraland is both narrow and recent. The earliest aerial photos used in this study were made in 1943 and cover only the northern most part of the study area around Sesfontein, and where repeat aerial photos were made in 1975 representing an interval of 32 years, the longest obtained in this study. All other matched aerial photos used in this study were clustered between the dates of 1958 to 1981 with an average time interval of only 20 years.<sup>2</sup> Scale and resolution can present further limitations to the use of matched aerial photographs. In this study, the scales between each matched pair were standardised during

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 5 for details of sources, dates, scales and identity numbers of photos used.



the enlargement process; photos were made to standard 1:36,000 scales (1:25,000 for Sesfontein) and the high resolution repeat photos were enlarged (from standard 1:50,000) to correspond to this. Low altitude aerial photos taken in 1994 (of Okombahe and Sesfontein) made it possible to analyse changes at these sites over two 20 year time spans.

### *Sampling frame and counting methods*

Because it was beyond the scope of this study to cover the whole of Damaraland in a random sample (due to constraints on time and money), I opted to use a stratified sampling method based on the locations of my fieldwork which also corresponded with many of my matched ground photo sites and fieldwork areas. Six locations were chosen:

1.) Uitdraai Farm (commercial) and eastern Otjimbingwe (communal); Vegetation Type<sup>3</sup>: Semi-desert Savanna Transition/Savanna. Rainfall: 200mm; CV = 45%.<sup>4</sup>

2.) Otjimbingwe village area (communal); Vegetation type: Semi-desert Savanna Transition/Nama-Karoo. Rainfall: 165mm; CV= 45%.

3.) Okombahe village & Jansen (communal), Okombahe Farm (commercial); Vegetation type: Semi-desert Savanna Transition/Savanna. Rainfall: 177mm; CV = +50%.

4.) Spitzkoppe Farm (communalized by Odendaal Commission); Vegetation type: Semi-desert Savanna Transition/ Savanna outlier. Rainfall: 100mm; CV = +60% .

5.) Black Range Farm (communalized by Odendaal Commission); Vegetation type: Semi-desert Savanna Transition/Nama-Karoo; Rainfall: 95mm; CV: +60%.

6.) Sesfontein village and outlying grazing areas (communal); Vegetation type: Mopane savanna/Nama-Karoo; Rainfall: 95mm; CV: +60%.

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<sup>3</sup> Vegetation types based on Giess (1971) & Irish (1994). See discussion regarding anomalies in vegetation classification in Chapter 7.

<sup>4</sup> Rainfall and CV for Uitdraai were interpolated from surrounding rainfall stations and are therefore only approximate.

These areas were selected in order to test variations and trends in woody vegetation change associated with:

- communal and commercial farming systems;
- old and new communal settlements;
- the relationship between riverine and savanna vegetation;
- correspondences between matched ground photos and aerial photos;
- apparently random changes in vegetation cover on a wider scale than was possible using matched ground photos.

Otjimbingwe was chosen mainly for the wealth of photographic evidence attached to it; both the number of ground photographs and the time sequence which these cover make this the best documented communal settlement within my fieldwork area. The settlement's social and economic history has been reasonably well recorded, at least up until the 1950s; rainfall records are complete between 1917 and 1995.

Okombahe is similar to Otjimbingwe in many respects: both settlements were established in the context of 19th century colonialism and trade; both became communal labour reserves during the early twentieth century; both have experienced large population increases during the last 40 years. Although they are separated by more than 150 kilometres, both locations have similar rainfall patterns and a long term average annual precipitation of 170 mm. Both are situated adjacent to wetlands on large ephemeral rivers and have similar vegetation types: all these common factors can therefore be used to compare one location against the other.<sup>5</sup>

Both Otjimbingwe and Okombahe share borders with commercial farms to the east. While strict comparisons of differences in woody vegetation composition and density are difficult to substantiate without detailed ground surveys, some indication of directional trends can be ascertained from aerial imagery. Because these borders have been in existence for at least 60 years, it should be possible to access changes brought about by different farming systems.

The sparsely populated area of Spitzkoppe and Black Range is located roughly mid-way between Otjimbingwe and Okombahe. Lying further west than either of these settlements, it receives less rainfall, although the vegetation in the area immediately surrounding Spitzkoppe has been

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<sup>5</sup> Irish (1994) situates both Okombahe and Otjimbingwe on the edge of the Savanna Biome and the Nama-Karoo Biome. Giess (1971) locates each settlement on the eastern edge of the Semi-desert and Savanna Transition.

described as a small outlier of the Savanna Biome due to increased run-off from this granite inselberg (Irish 1994). Black Range however is classified as Nama-Karoo (ibid.) or Semi-desert Savanna Transition (Giess 1971). This location presents several environmental and historical variables which contrast with Otjimbingwe and Okombahe. At the same time, the Spitzkoppe/Black Range area has characteristics common to much of Damaraland today: both of these farms were permanently occupied as commercial holdings in the 1940s and 're-communalised' during the late 1960s as part of the Odendaal 'plan' for an expanded Damara 'homeland'. Since then, Spitzkoppe has grown into a communal village and several new farm posts have been established within Black Range. This location has much in common with the physical, climatic and historical circumstances of large parts of Damaraland which were socially and economically transformed by the implementation of the Odendaal recommendations.<sup>6</sup>

Because it lies some three hundred kilometres to the north of the study area, Sesfontein represents an anomaly in this sample. It was included because in spite of the features which set it apart from its southern counterparts, it has many similar and overlapping characteristics. Sesfontein has a similar rainfall regime to Spitzkoppe and is situated within the Nama-Karoo Biome, although the area supports a different plant community dominated by *Colophospermum mopane* and *Acacia tortilis*. It is a communal settlement with considerable historical depth but has until recently remained relatively isolated and unaffected by the cash economy. One of the main reasons why Sesfontein was included in this study was due to the fact that so little historical documentation in the form of matched photos and demographic history is available for the core study area to the south; the combination of a cluster of matched ground photos and the availability of early aerial photos with a longer time lapse between matches, gives Sesfontein a relevant place in this comparative study.

The areas covered by the matched aerial photographs for each of the six locations ranged from approximately 50 to 100 square kilometres. Between twelve and twenty sample sites within each location were chosen randomly within stratified parameters. Each location raised slightly different criteria for determining a stratified sample in order to analyse trends in tree and shrub density related to settlements, fence-lines, varying degrees of

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 5, pages 252 - 265 for further discussion of the implementation of the Odendaal Report and the "communalization" of commercial farms in Damaraland.

disturbance and vegetation types. In total, 102 sites were sampled across the six locations. Between twelve and eighteen sample sites, each covering an area of more than 50 hectares each, were sampled at each location resulting in 7.5% to 15% coverage of each aerial photo location. Unlike Bahre (1991) who tested the hypothesis that climatic change was responsible for vegetation change in the arid and semi-arid areas of south-western USA, my objective was to test the assumption that overgrazing and unsustainable natural resource use by communal dwellers was responsible for a loss of tree cover (and degradation) in and around permanent settlements.<sup>7</sup> By comparing settlement areas with peripheral areas, it was possible to begin separating the impact of human disturbance (grazing pressure, firewood collection and the utilization of trees for building) from the effects of climate.

Different tree and shrub counting methods were tried in order to quantify changes in vegetation. It was found that the method advocated by Bahre (1991:90-99) using transects plotted on a zoom-transfer stereoscope was prone to inaccuracy due to both resolution differences and seasonal variations in the matches. For example, counting trees and shrubs along a transect delineated by the straight edge of a transparent plastic sheet resulted in highly inaccurate readings of tree numbers due to the fact that tree density appeared to be significantly increased in a photo with high contrast taken during or shortly after a good rainy season (full foliation) and a photo with poor, less contrasted resolution taken during the winter season of a second drought year (no foliation)<sup>8</sup>. Even when transects were plotted between two random landscape features up to 3 kilometres apart with tree counts exceeding 100, there was still up to a 20 percent margin of error due to the difficulty in correcting these image anomalies. Part of the problem resides in the fact that slight distortions exist between images taken from slightly different flight paths so that in order to follow the same ground transect a straight line on one image becomes a curved line on the other. However, the main discrepancy resides in differences in contrast, resolution and seasonal foliation.

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<sup>7</sup> Definitions of environmental degradation in the sparsely wooded western communal areas are usually associated with loss of tree cover. Bush encroachment or thickening is usually associated with definitions of degradation in higher rainfall areas, mainly to the east of Damaraland.

<sup>8</sup> The time of day is also an important factor affecting the apparent density of tree and shrub cover, especially during periods of full foliation when long shadows in one image and none in its match seriously distort the appraisal of tree and shrub density in comparative transects.



Counting trees in matching quadrats was more accurate, but this method would have seriously restricted the extent of coverage: densities of several thousand trees and shrubs per square kilometre were common. In the end, my preferred method was one using visual estimates based on stereoscopic viewing: this enabled me to accurately assess changes over much larger areas (50 - 100 hectares) than would have been possible using a strict counting method. This involves matching the same sets of trees on both images simultaneously and then flicking the attention from one image to another, thereby appraising percentage changes in cover. Each stereoscopic view represents approximately one square kilometre<sup>9</sup> and by moving the matched images and simultaneously adjusting them so that trees common to each photo remain superimposed, it is possible to appraise changes along a broad transect several kilometres long and or within areas confined to a radius from matching points. This flexible 'counting' methodology, while based on subjective estimates rather than strict counts of transect or quadrat areas, is the most accurate reflection of comparative change.

The sampling methods used to analyse this small set of matched aerial photos does not lend itself to statistical manipulation. This is because each of the six locations are characterised by slightly different climatic, land-use and biotic influences. What follows is a description of changes which can be observed in each of the six locations listed above. These observations comprise only one layer of evidence complementing the interpretation of matched ground photography, rainfall statistics, land use and population data. The matched aerial photos reveal directional trends in vegetation cover during a period of only two to three decades immediately prior to the onset of prolonged drought in the early 1980s. It was also a period of political disruption when the policies of 'grand' apartheid and the creation of 'ethnic homelands' resulted in increased population pressure and a change in land-use patterns in most of the locations examined here. The effects of these radical population shifts had a variety of seemingly contradictory effects which can only be understood in the context of social, economic and demographic trends. Many of these have been discussed in detail in previous chapters. What follows is a patchwork of evidence presented for each of the six aerial photo locations brought together in a conclusion based on all six case studies.

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<sup>9</sup> Using a Hilger and Watts stereoscope with 8x magnification on 1: 36,000 images.

## Uitdraai

Uitdraai Farm is situated some 10 kilometres to the east of Otjimbingwe and forms a border separating the communal area of this former reserve and the commercial farms which surround it. This border has been in existence for at least 60 years and should therefore provide evidence of any differential effects which these two farming systems might have had on the environment.

Fifteen sites were sampled over the area of Uitdraai Farm and the adjacent communal land using aerial photos spanning the period between 1958 and 1979. Eight sites from Uitdraai farm and seven in the adjacent communal area were sampled in order to test two variables: (1) changes in woody vegetation in relation to distance from the farm house and (2) variations between comparable sites on either side of the border.

Analysis of these sample sites show that declines in woody cover (-10%) occurred around the farmhouse and kraal. Away from the farm house, this effect is less noticeable but there is still a trend to decreased cover (-5% to -10%) becoming increasingly patchy with greater distance (0 to -10%). The veld on either side of the fence dividing commercial from communal grazing shows considerable continuity, although both tend to patchiness, with some areas showing an increase in vegetation and others showing a decrease; this effect is more noticeable in the communal veld. On the commercial side of the border, tree depletion (-1%) is more noticeable than on the communal side (0%), probably as a result of 'camped' cattle grazing the cleared area adjacent to the fence line. The aerial photo from 1979 shows a clear colour differentiation between the communal and commercial sides of this boundary, indicating that the commercial side was less heavily grazed during the preceding season, but this demarcation was not noticeable in terms of tree and shrub cover. Furthermore, the veld on the communal side of the fence, up to 2 kilometres away, shows patchy increases (+3% to +5%) as well as decreases. Apart from more pronounced patchiness, both communal and commercial veld areas were broadly similar in terms of woody vegetation change.

Uitdraai is situated on a wetland section of the Swakop River. The rapid growth of riverine vegetation, much of it *Tamarix usneoides*, (+50%) follows a pattern similar to that described for Otjimbingwe (see below). This

wetland, which once extended into the Otjimbingwe Reserve, was previously cultivated by communal farmers sporadically during the first half of the 20th century but has since become dry and its gardens abandoned (Fuller 1993:51). This area was also put to early use by the traders and travellers based in Otjimbingwe who used it as a 'post' from which to water and graze cattle and trek oxen at a distance from the heavily utilized and quickly denuded grazing around the settlement. Palgrave took a series of photographs overlooking this stretch of the river at Uitdraai ("near which our cattle had been kept during our stay at Otjimbingwe") on August 29, 1876 on his way inland (Palgrave 1991:43).<sup>10</sup> His panoramic shots show a landscape denuded of ephemeral vegetation and a foreground littered with dung. Today, this photo site is inside the fenced commercial boundary and has been managed on a private 'commercial' basis since the Otjimbingwe Reserve's boundaries were established by proclamation in 1926 (Köhler 1958).

One of the most notable changes observed in the ground matched photos taken at Uitdraai, is the severity and extent of soil erosion which has occurred at this site during the last 120 years. Two large *Acacia eriolobas* were identified in both images (one of which is now little more than a carcass stump): the root systems of both have been exposed to a depth of 1.6 metres by a process of flood erosion. The outwash where these trees stand is some 25 metres wide and comprises one of a series of broad erosion gullies which show up sharply on the aerial view of 1958, but which appear less distinct in 1979. The matched ground photos reveal that significant increases in vegetation density have occurred at this site during the 20th century. Species composition has been largely unaffected as evidenced by the predominance of *Acacia* spp., *Salvadora persica*, and *Phaeoptilum spinosum*, in 1876 and 1995. During the period covered by the aerial photographs, a decrease in woody vegetation cover of -5% has occurred.

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 4, Matched photo # 42

**Table 6: Woody vegetation change in relation to habitat and distance from Uitdraai Farm house and distance from border fence (1959-1979).**

<b>Uitdraai Farm Commercial /Communal Border</b>	<b>1958 - 1979 Commercial</b>	<b>1958 - 1979 Communal</b>
1) River Habitats		
a) Wetlands	+ 50 %	+40%
2) Veld (distance from farm house)		
a) < .5 km.	-10%	-
b) 1 - 2 km	-5% to -10%	-4%
c) 2 - 3 km	0 to -10%	0 to -10%
d) 3 - 4 km	0 to -10%	+5% to -10%
3) Veld (distance from border fence)		
a) < .5 km	0 to -3%	0 to -4%
b) 2-3 km	-3% to -10%	+5% to -10%
c) 3-4 km	-7%	+3% to -10%

### *Summary*

Regardless of how the environment in Palgrave's photos is interpreted (as either degraded, overgrazed, or as a reflection of long term climatic trends), the combined ground and aerial photographic evidence suggests that woody vegetation increases at Uitdraai are consistent with those observed at Otjimbingwe during the 20th century.<sup>11</sup> Aerial photo matches show few signs of differentiation in woody vegetation cover on either side of the commercial/communal border which, if present, could be attributed to different land management practices. Depletion of vegetation in the vicinity of the farm house indicates the existence of a piosphere around Uitdraai farm house but this is much less pronounced than that of Otjimbingwe village (see below). Tree and shrub densities over the wider landscape have decreased during the period 1958 - 1979, although patchiness in directional change is more pronounced across the communal veld. In the absence of more complete livestock records, it is difficult to substantiate the causes of this. However, high rainfall averages during the first half of the century and decreased rainfall since 1958 tend to support the hypothesis that climate, rather than human and livestock impacts are responsible for the changes described.

<sup>11</sup> See the following section 'Otjimbingwe' and also Chapter 7.



## Otjimbingwe

The aerial photos of Otjimbingwe span twenty-one years between 1958 and 1979. Twelve areas were examined for changes in vegetation density including the village, the Swakop and Omusema Rivers and the surrounding veld at increasing distances and in all directions from the village. Within the settlement itself, tree cover has been depleted by up to 50%. To the north and west of the village, the rate of decrease in tree cover drops to zero at a distance of two kilometres, after which increases of up to 20% are observable in patches ( $\pm 25$  ha.). On the plains to the south of the village, across the Swakop River (see figs. 9a & 9b) the decrease in trees and shrub numbers is in the order of -5% to -7%. Outside of this 'piosphere', stability or slight increases (-1% to +5%) in woody vegetation are observable, including the area to the east of the Omusema River on communal land between Otjimbingwe and the nearest commercial farms. The riparian woodlands in the vicinity of the village have increased by up to 12% in wetland areas (which appear dry by 1979), however tree and shrub density in naturally dry stretches of both the Swakop and Omusema Rivers show a substantial reduction of up to 30%.

**Table 7: Woody vegetation change in relation to habitat and distance from Otjimbingwe village (1959-1979).**

Otjimbingwe	1958 - 1979
1) River Habitats	
a) Wetlands at village	+ 12 %
b) Drylands 2 - 4 km from village	- 15% to -30%
2) Veld (distance from village)	
a) < .5 km.	-5% to -50%
b) 1 - 2 km	0 to +10%
c) 2 - 3 km	+20%
d) 3 - 4 km.	+5% to -5%

The matched ground photographs of the Otjimbingwe settlement area<sup>12</sup> suggest that between 1876 and 1950 a dramatic increase in woody vegetation occurred in virtually all areas depicted: in the village, on the banks of the

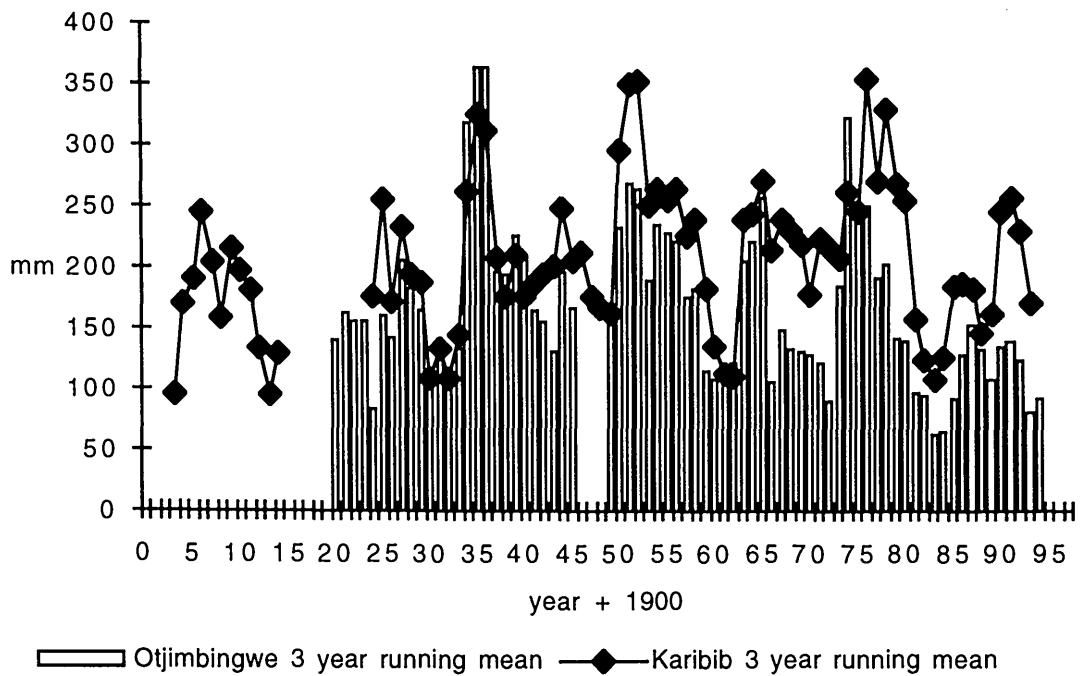
<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 4, Matched photo # 37 - 41, 42, 43.

Swakop and Omusema Rivers, across the plains to the south and east of Otjimbingwe. Since 1950, some of these trends have been reversed; the matched aerial photos confirm the extent of this depletion, but in comparison with the sparse vegetation depicted in Palgrave's photos (1876) there is a long way to go before the veld is denuded to its former (possibly degraded) condition. These changes were not confined to the Otjimbingwe area: photos of Karibib (only 55 kilometres to the north of Otjimbingwe) at the turn of the century<sup>13</sup> depict a grassland sparsely populated by shrubs and trees confined mainly to water courses and drainage channels. Matched ground photos of Karibib reveal that a three to four-fold increase in tree and shrub density has occurred during the 20th century, somewhat more than the estimated doubling of woody vegetation density as depicted in matched ground photos of Otjimbingwe.

The photographic evidence accords with the rainfall records in supporting the theory that climate has played a major role in driving vegetation change. Rainfall statistics from Otjimbingwe show a trend of increased precipitation from a period of low rainfall prior to 1930, rising by 40% to reach a peak in long-term averages around 1950, and then declining by 25% during the following three decades. Since 1980, rainfall has fallen to levels which are 50% below the high average obtaining between 1934 and 1958. When this is compared with Karibib, a similar pattern of long-term precipitation increase is evident up until 1950, after which a significant divergence in precipitation patterns between the two locations occurred. This in itself might account for the differential increases in tree and shrub density in both areas over the long term.

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix 4, Matched photo # 23 & 25



**Fig. 11: Rainfall record (3 year running mean) comparing Otjimbingwe and Karibib (1903 - 1994).**

The aerial photo taken in 1958 records the veld after a prolonged period of above average rainfall while the second image taken in 1979 records the end of a period of reduced rainfall and the beginning of what would become Otjimbingwe's worst drought of the century. The combined evidence from aerial and ground photographs suggests that both long and short term responses to vegetation change are dynamic and contrary to predictions based on assumptions of overstocking. In the absence of more complete records, the relationship between rainfall, stocking density, population pressure and vegetation change can only be guessed at. However, fragmentary evidence suggests that livestock and rainfall have followed consistent patterns during the present century.

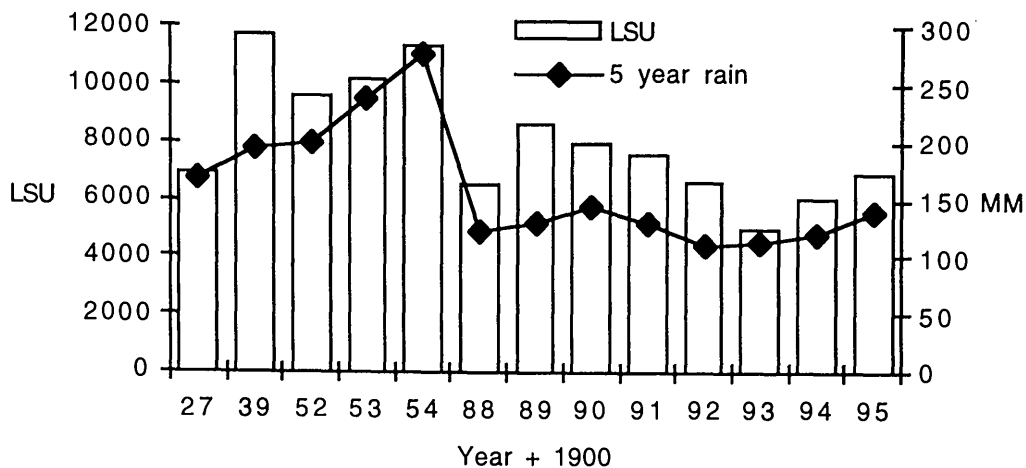


Figure 12: Comparison of stocking rates (LSU) with rainfall averages (5 year running mean) for Otjimbingwe, 1927-1995.

### Summary

Predictions of environmental collapse due to overstocking have been made regarding Otjimbingwe since at least 1921 (Fuller 1993:51). The history of the Otjimbingwe since that time follows a similar course to that described for Okombahe in previous chapters. Rapid human and livestock population fluctuations have occurred as a consequence of drought, economic and political conditions, but there is little evidence to suggest that either vegetation or productive capacity has suffered as a result of unsustainable practises. The upstream damming of the Swakop in 1974, coupled with declining rainfall and increased water extraction has undoubtedly had a major impact on riverine vegetation. The pattern of sharp declines in woody vegetation density within the village is reversed at a distance of three to four kilometres where significant increases in woody vegetation density are observable. Outside this circumference, less dramatic directional changes in tree and shrub densities have occurred: such trends can be characterised as 'patchy'.

Overall, a significant increase in tree and shrub density has occurred during this century, corresponding to long-term climatic trends. More recently, declines in rainfall, coupled with increased human disturbance account for the development of a piosphere showing signs of degradation in the village itself. However, increases in tree and shrub densities on the periphery of this piosphere indicate that the effects of human and livestock disturbance actually promote tree and shrub recruitment. Outside this



piosphere the veld shows signs of patchy increases in woody vegetation density consistent with stocking rates which consistently 'track' the climatic events which occurred immediately preceding and during the period covered by the matched aerial photos. The comparison of areas which have been intermittently or moderately grazed around Uitdraai and Otjimbingwe suggests that decreases in woody vegetation have been more pronounced further east. This could be explained in two ways: (1) the effects of reduced rainfall and increased CVs on the Savanna vegetation communities has been more dramatic than on Nama-Karoo plant communities or (2) the data sample is too small to reflect such differentials accurately.

## Okombahe

The vegetation about Okombahe is very scanty, with the exception of the valleys of the periodical rivers. This region already bears the character of the desert tract, which runs parallel to the coast. [. . .] There can scarcely be a doubt that this barren coast-girdle gradually increases in breadth and encroaches gradually upon the more fertile parts of the country, which in time will become as barren as the coast land now is, unless an unforeseen atmospheric change takes place. Those parts where I repeatedly crossed the desert girdle bear evidence of a richer vegetation in former days, and where, at present, no, or very little, rain falls, we meet with the courses of former streams and rivulets. (Hahn 1877: 221-2)

Okombahe is one of the oldest communal reserves in Southern Africa and its village has been continuously occupied since 1870. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 describe the social and economic history of this area in detail. For the purposes of discussing vegetation change in relation to matched aerial photography, only the most salient features of this history need be referred to in this section. These include the following:

- 1.) A four-fold increase in the human population of the village between 1958 and 1980 followed by a moderate 30% increase in the succeeding decade.

- 2.) A decrease in livestock numbers due to drought between 1959 and 1962 halving the pre-drought level of over 2,000 LSUs to less than 1,000 LSUs<sup>14</sup>, recovering to 1,620 LSUs in 1970 and exceeding pre-1958 levels before the drought in 1981.

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<sup>14</sup> Kohler 1959 and Gordon 1972

- 3.) The demise of the dairy industry in the 1960s.
- 4.) The dispersal of farmers to the new Odendaal farms during the early 1970s.
- 5.) The lowering of the water table in the Omaruru River at Okombahe as a result of drought, upstream damming and excessive extraction in Okombahe.

The matched aerial photos of Okombahe span a mere 20 years between 1961 and 1981. In spite of the short time interval, several distinct trends can be distinguished from comparing these matched sets. Twenty sites were defined and compared; ten examined the riparian woodlands of the Omaruru River or its larger tributaries; ten sites compared the veld at various distances from settlements including two control sites where minimum grazing disturbance occurred. Veld sites were chosen so as to facilitate a comparison between communal and commercially managed land<sup>15</sup> as well to ascertain change in relation to distance from settlements, the furthest away being 3.5 kilometres to the north and south of the Omaruru River. Riverine sites were sampled to look at changes related to the wetlands, garden cultivation and dry riverbed areas.

#### *Comparison of commercial and communal land: 1961 to 1981*

Six sites compared communal and commercial land showing that decreases in the veld's woody vegetation were more pronounced in the communal area. Riverine habitats also showed significant decreases. The small sample size makes it difficult to draw conclusions from this information.

**Table 8: Comparison of percentage woody vegetation change in commercial and communal land by habitat (1961 to 1981).**

<b>Okombahe &amp; Okombahe Farm</b>	<b>Commercial</b>	<b>Communal</b>
1) Veld	+10% to -40%	-10% to -20%
2) River habitats	-30%	-15%

The most dramatic decreases are evident in the commercial veld where up to 40% of trees and shrubs were lost within this twenty year period. Sites

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<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, no data is available on the stocking rates of the adjoining commercial farm "Okombahe" (no. 112) although it is believed that commercial cattle production has been continuous during the period 1958 to 1981. During fieldwork (1994-1996) the Martin Luther High School leased the grazing to a neighbouring commercial farmer.

immediately across the border fence within communal grazing areas show a loss of between 15% and 20%.

#### *Analysis of woody vegetation change in communal land: 1961 to 1981*

The two veld control sites show little or no change (0 to -5%), although overall, significant decreases in the density of woody veld vegetation are evident in communal areas throughout this period. The more western sites away from Okombahe village and closer to the outlying settlements of Jansen and !Narutsaub (see Map 4 ) exhibit decreases in the range of 10% to 20%, including trees associated with minor tributaries (used extensively for firewood collection).<sup>16</sup>

Riparian woodlands show a consistent pattern of dramatic increases (up to 30%) in wetland areas and decreases of around 15% in dry river areas both upstream and downstream of the Okombahe wetlands. Even in the centre of the village where intensive gardening was practised both in the river bed itself and on the tree-lined banks, increases are generally between 15% and 30%. This evidence accords well with the matched ground photos of the river and south bank of the village spanning the years 1953 and 1995.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Low-level aerial photography: 1994*

I flew over Okombahe in June of 1994 and made a series of colour photographs from an altitude of approximately 1500 feet. The resulting photo collage of my flight presents a distorted view of Okombahe, but provides enough detail to make accurate correspondences with earlier aerial photos possible, facilitating analysis of change between 1981 and 1994. The overall size of the area to be compared is less than half the size of the 1961-1981 match but does include the village, many of its outlying homesteads and several kilometres up and down-stream of the village.

Comparison of eleven sites common to both the 1961/1981 and 1981/1994 sets of photos showed an overall increase in woody vegetation, even in highly disturbed areas within the village. A massive increase in riparian woodlands (up to 75%) composed primarily of *Faidherbia albida* , *Acacia tortilis* and *Tamarix usneoides*, serves to confirm the evidence revealed

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<sup>16</sup> On the whole, only dead trees are cut for firewood because they provide the best fuel.

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix 4, matched photo # 45.

by the earlier aerial match. Where the river passes through the centre of the village, several hectares of woodland have been recruited since 1981 (+1200%). Significant increases of woody vegetation are evident within the school compound at MLH (serving as an exclosure for commercial livestock), but also increases on commercial farmland just outside this exclosure and adjacent to the Omaruru River banks have occurred (+3%), although woodlands within this upstream portion of the river bed (in both commercial and communal areas) showed no significant change. The communal veld around Okombahe's scattered homesteads shows either no change or a slight decrease (0 to -5%%) although small water courses and minor tributaries have thickened around the settlement (+3% and +30%).

Table 9: Summary of averaged trends in percentage woody vegetation change for Okombahe, Okombahe Farm and Jansen by habitat and distance from settlement.

Okombahe, Okombahe Farm & Jansen	1961-81	1981-94	1961-94
1) Omaruru River & Adjacent Banks			
a) upstream commercial	-3%	+5%	+2%
b) upstream communal	-5%	+5%	0%
c) village wetlands	+20%	+30%	+50%
d) downstream wetlands	+25%	+50%	+75%
2) Veld			
a) <1 km from settlement	-15%	+10%	-5%
b) 1 - 2 km from settlement	-12%	+10%	-2%
c) 2 - 5 km from settlement	-10%	+15%	+5%
d) water courses and minor tributaries	-10%	+15%	+5%
e) commercial veld (adjacent to MLH)	-25%	+3%	-22%
f) controls (veld)	-3%%	+6%	+3%

While these trends are rough averages of values observed, they tend to disguise important details such as the enormous variation within each category. For instance, within the village itself, vegetation around older established habitations has increased as has the shrub density in the immediate surrounding veld. Consistent decreases since 1961 are often found adjacent to peripheral homesteads, on the outskirts of the village where livestock, firewood collection and fencing materials are more heavily exploited. There would seem to be a broad balance between the increased



recruitment brought about by moderate disturbance and the heavy utilization of woody vegetation by the settlement's inhabitants.

The marked decrease in trees and shrubs between 1961 and 1981, followed by a significant increase between 1981 and 1994, indicates that woody vegetation is highly responsive to both climatic and livestock fluctuations. In spite of the consistent decline in annual rainfall averages over the last three decades, the reduction in livestock numbers to 20% of pre-drought levels following the 1981-4 drought must account for the recruitment and rapid tree and shrub growth during the few years of above average rainfall since that time.<sup>18</sup>

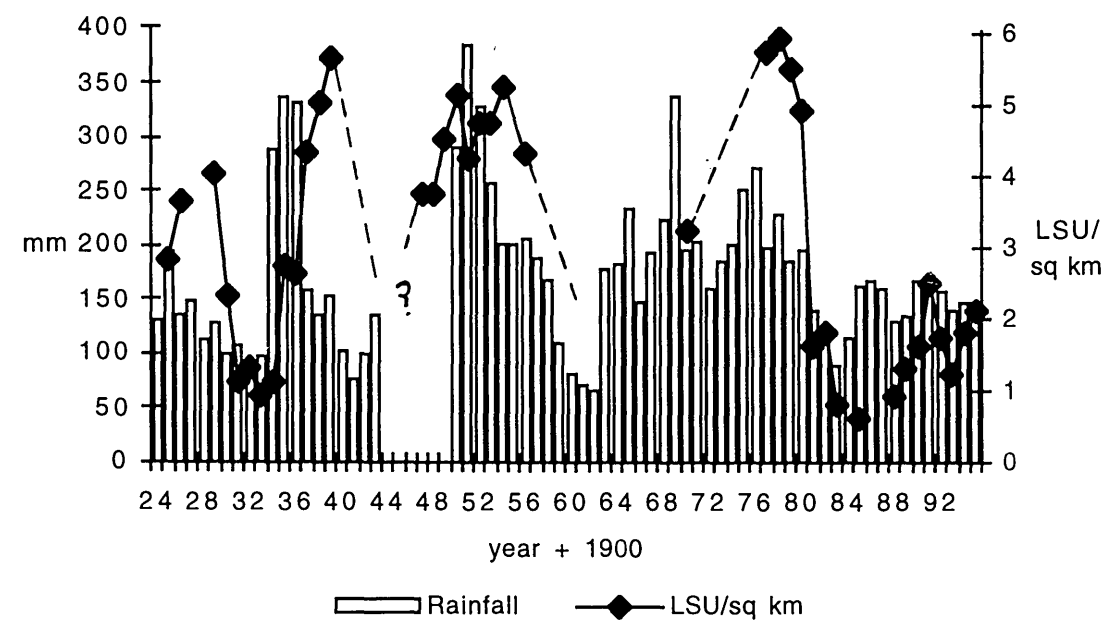


Fig. 13: Rainfall (3 year running mean) and stocking density (LSUs per square kilometre) for Okombahe Reserve. [Data derived from Blue Books (1925 - 1940) ; Kohler (1959); Gordon (1972); Veterinary Services Livestock census, 1980 - 1992; Agricultural Extension 1993 - 1995].

### Summary

This case study of Okombahe serves to highlight the dangers in drawing conclusions from evidence derived from one twenty year period. Had it not been possible to compare the matched set of aerial photos with aerial photos taken in 1994, it would have been easy to conclude that 'degradation' in the

<sup>18</sup> See Chapters 4, 5 & 6 for the history of stocking density in Okombahe Reserve. See also Appendices 6 & 7 for more information regarding stocking densities and livestock population fluctuations.

form of reduced woody vegetation was taking place as a result of poor communal and commercial management. The 1994 photos confirm that climate and stocking densities (which track medium-term rainfall conditions) are the most likely factors underlying woody vegetation change. Several conclusions can be drawn from the preceding analysis; the most salient can be summarised as follows:

- both dryland and riparian environments are highly responsive to climatic and livestock population fluctuations;
- human impacts on woody vegetation is less significant than climate and livestock;
- patchiness in woody vegetation change is an inherent characteristic of this dryland environment;
- disturbance by humans and livestock accentuate 'natural' processes affecting woody vegetation change: the dynamics of livestock, climatic and environmental interactions can be seen to exaggerate the functioning of this non-equilibrium system;
- woody vegetation is less resilient under stable stocking densities associated with commercial farm management; communal/commercial with commercial farm management; communal/commercial comparisons are similar for Okombahe and Otjimbingwe;
- resilience rather than degradation characterises environmental change in the vicinity of Okombahe during the last 35 years.

## **Spitzkoppe**

In order to examine the environmental history of Spitzkoppe, it is necessary to piece together evidence from a variety of sources not yet covered in this thesis. Seven matched ground photo sites, matched aerial photos, rainfall data and a brief land-use history of the area over the last one hundred years will be combined and analysed in order to discover the relative importance of climate, human and livestock impacts on woody vegetation change in this sparsely populated, arid environment.

### *Land-use history*

During the millennium prior to the colonial use of the area in the late 19th century, the natural occurrence of extensive pools and the availability of

underground water from shallow wells adjacent to Spitzkoppe's massive granite hills drew pastoralists from further east who were then able to exploit the extensive grazing here during good rainfall years. Given that this area was probably only sporadically used during pre-colonial times, the impact of pastoralism on the environment must have been relatively insignificant compared to the intensity of disturbance brought about by permanent settlement in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

The plant species which have been identified from Spitzkoppe's archaeological sites are all commonly found there today (Kinahan 1990:8), indicating some degree of continuity in the plant community since before pastoralism was introduced to this area almost two thousand years ago. However, John Kinahan's assertion that permanent settlement commencing in colonial times "took no account of the deterioration of the pasture which would inevitably follow" (1990: 13) lacks substantiation and is typical of the assumptions made by many experts working in these arid western areas. Furthermore, it is by no means certain that commercial livestock farming at Spitzkoppe was unsuccessful and "unable to support a single settler household" (ibid.: 13), although I do support his contention that the present community at Spitzkoppe "typifies the compromised economic status of communal farming settlements throughout Namibia".

In 1877, Palgrave described 'Spits kopjes' as a quarantine area "for the common use of all nations. [Palgrave] intended, with the approval of the Govt., to have wells dug there. At present there was plenty of grass but no water" (1991:221). In the same year, the Witboois or /Khobosen raided Herero cattle in the Spitzkoppe area (Kohler 1958: 19). McKiernan mentions that Spitzkoppe was used as a quarantine station for 50 horses in the rainy season of 1879, since it was recognised as a so-called 'sterfplaats' where horses did not contract the highly fatal African Horsesickness (AHS)<sup>19</sup>.

Between 1880 and the outbreak of the Rinderpest epidemic in 1897, Spitzkoppe became increasingly important as a way station on the transport route between Swakopmund and the interior. The Deutsche Kolonial-Gesellschaft wagon transport and trading station, was built during the 1890s and a photo depicting the barren piosphere which surrounded the station in

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<sup>19</sup> This disease seriously hampered the colonial ambitions of everyone from Jonker Afrikaner to Leutwein who commented that mounted cavalry were in 'constant danger of becoming an infantry again'. The seriousness of the threat can be appreciated from the death of almost 50% of the horse population from AHS in Namibia in 1990 (Schneider 1994:175).

1896 is the original used in a match which documents the recovery of this site during the last 100 years.<sup>20</sup> When the Rinderpest outbreak reached Namibia, a year after this original photograph was taken, it not only caused the total collapse of livestock production, but also "threatened to paralyse the traffic of freight and thereby also cut off all supplies from the coast to the interior" (Schneider 1994:149). In response to this threat, an immediate start was made in constructing the Swakopmund - Windhoek railway: it would be almost four decades before any further attempt was made to develop Spitzkoppe.

The western farms which now comprise the communal area of north Karibib District were first surveyed and gazetted during the late 1930s in line with the provisions of the Land Settlement Proclamation passed in 1927.<sup>21</sup> Under this legislation, the government Land Board was charged with advertising and disposing of Crown land to appropriate white settlers. The process of confining black Namibians to tiny labour reserves had already been accomplished by the mandated government who confirmed and consolidated the German 'treaty lands' (or Native Reserves) such as Sesfontein, Fransfontein, Okombahe and Otjimbingwe (Wellington 1967:280). Economic depression and severe drought during the late 1920s and early 1930s curtailed settler expansion and it was only in 1938 that short term leases were issued to prospective purchasers. Sales were often concluded with these tenants within a period of one to five years, in many instances government grants and loans were made available for this purpose.

All the farms adjoining Spitzkoppe (Black Range, Klein Spitzkoppe, Swartz Spitzkoppe, Ketelbank, and Pforte) were occupied on a leasehold basis around or shortly before 1940. The earliest records of formal lease agreements pertaining to Spitzkoppe begin in 1942 when it was occupied by a somewhat elderly, and 'down-at-heal' Afrikaans speaking farmer by the name of Pelser.<sup>22</sup> Correspondence now held in the National Archives reveals a long running and bitter dispute concerning the allocation of this farm by an English speaking applicant who cast serious doubt on Pelser's

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<sup>20</sup> See Appendix 4, Matched Photo # 6.

<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 5, pages 252 - 255

<sup>22</sup> All information regarding the tenancies and ownership of Spitzkoppe and Black Range commercial farms was derived from The National Archives of Namibia, Source LAN, Storage Unit 1340, unless otherwise stated. Afrikaans and German files were translated by Emily Kapena Shigwedha.



intentions and ability to utilise the farm. Although Pelser was portrayed as 'white trash' by this would-be tenant, his petitions were dismissed and the lease was transferred to Pelser's half brother Johannes Jooste in 1945. Jooste occupied Spitzkoppe continuously for the next 21 years during which time he made many improvements to the farm (with the help of generous government grants) including an elegant and cool nine roomed house surrounded by an orchard, grape vines, and lucerne land. Three bore-holes, reservoirs and two sheep kraals near the house were supplemented by two posts, one 4 miles to the southwest and one seven miles to the north where bore-holes were installed and at the later post (Topaas), a second substantial house erected.

Spitzkoppe was about the same size as other farms in the area: 15,000 hectares (about 60 square miles) with a carrying capacity set to 1 large stock unit (LSU) per 30 hectares. Jooste, like most of his neighbours, farmed small stock comprising a combination of karakul sheep and goats. Nothing in the records suggests that Jooste was unable to make a reasonable income from his flock of 2,400 goats and sheep up until the onset of drought in 1959. Even assuming a very low lambing percentage of 50%, and a herd size which fluctuated depending on yearly rainfall, the annual sales of pelts and surplus animals would have been sufficient to justify this as a farming enterprise.

The history of commercial livestock farming in this area coincided with one of the most favourable rainfall periods of the century; only two isolated years of drought occurred during the 20 year period up until 1959. The effects of the subsequent four year drought which ended in 1963 were somewhat mitigated by the prospect of the government buying back these farms at grossly inflated prices in order to implement the Odendaal Plan. In line with this, the government bought the farm from Johannes Jooste in 1965, and re-let it to him on a yearly basis until he was able to buy another farm. Jooste then sub-let Spitzkoppe to his former neighbour A.J. Louw whose large extended family owned or leased several other farms in the area. Louw grazed 400 cattle and 1,300 small stock at Spitzkoppe before the farm reverted to government control and was leased to a Mrs. Brecher with 2,700 small stock for a year and then to Mr. D.P. Marias who subsequently grazed 1,500 small stock here until the farm was evacuated in February 1969.

There is no reason to suppose that the rapid turn-over of tenants after 1965 when the government purchased and re-let farms such as Spitzkoppe

was anything other than good business for those concerned. Rents were a fraction of the value of the farms which the government had only just bought: the yearly rent for Spitzkoppe was 150 Rands, fully stocked, or 0.13% of the purchase price. Other farm rents in the area were only slightly more realistic at 1.5% to 1.9% of purchase prices. The lush grazing resulting from several years of above average rainfall would have presented opportunities for rapid herd growth and quick profits with none of the disadvantages inherent in the ownership (and capital investment) of a marginal farm.

Finally, in 1969 the Odendaal Plan was put into effect and communal farmers began to resettle these vacated farms. When Willem Hoebebe arrived at Spitzkoppe with his uncle, aunt and grandfather in 1969, it must have looked like paradise. The rains had been exceptionally good that summer and the veld was covered in dense stands of grass which encompassed the farmhouse, orchard and vineyard, having reclaimed this normally bare disturbed area in the absence of humans and their livestock for only a few months. Willem was five at the time, having been 'given' to his uncle by his mother. His uncle Joshua was the first Damara farmer to occupy Spitzkoppe.

Joshua Hoebebe had originally worked on a commercial farm in the Gobabis area. The opportunity to farm in his own right gave him the incentive to buy a car, and begin the search for a suitable location in the newly created communal 'homeland'. He obtained permission from the appropriate official in the new administrative centre of Khorixas to reside in Spitzkoppe and had soon arranged to move his stock and family the 320 kilometres by train from Omitara to Usakos, and from there walked the remaining 50 kilometres with his 220 goats and 5 horses. Being the first to arrive, Willem's uncle and grandparents moved into the luxurious farm house.

During the following five years, communal farmers occupied the surrounding posts on the farms Nelrus, Topaas, and Black Range, but Willem grew up more or less on his own in Spitzkoppe until he went to school in Okombahe. Two families arrived in 1975. Herman Uri-Khob and his wife were already elderly and he had recently retired from working in the municipal slaughterhouse in Okahandja, having previously been a stock man on commercial farms for most of his life. Albert Tsuseb was married to Herman's sister and was also elderly, having come here from Kaps Farm

near Windhoek as a result of a labour dispute with his former white employer who wanted Albert to reduce his livestock numbers. Rather than sell his stock he decided to move to Damaraland and did so in much the same way as Joshua, having first found a suitable place, and receiving permission from the authorities in Khorixas. None of the people knew the area beforehand. "At that time, the rains had been very good for several years and Spitzkoppe had been well 'rested'"(Willem Hoebe, pers. com. 6/3/96). Stock numbers by 1980 had hardly begun to reach the levels which obtained here during its days as a commercial farm.

At the onset of the 1980-84 drought a total of five communal farmers kept approximately 40 cows and 750 small stock. Four of these farmers continue to comprise a core population of extended and often inter-related family groups. Livestock census figures for the years 1988 to 1995 record a total of sixteen livestock owners living in Spitzkoppe during this time, although in any one year this figure fluctuated from between four and eight owners.<sup>23</sup> Five farmers came and went from the settlement for a variety of reasons including drought; three died; two lost all their stock through drought; the primary school principle brought his own herd of goats as did the new shop owner from Okombahe; one elderly man and a single mother recently received 10 goats each from the Lutheran church drought rehabilitation scheme.

The average length of time which livestock owners stay in Spitzkoppe is only two and a half years. Apart from neighbouring farmers using Spitzkoppe as a temporary grazing resource, the core group of farmers also left Spitzkoppe at various times in order to find relief grazing. Ursulla Goagases is one of this core group, and one of five female livestock farmers to have lived here. She owns the second largest herd in Spitzkoppe. Ursulla has moved her herd four times since moving to the village in 1976: first to Tubusis, an Odendaal farm some forty kilometres to the north-west, but as the 1980-4 drought deepened she migrated west to Oetmoed, on the Omaruru River where riparian woodlands sustained her depleted herd on the edge of the Namib desert. The surrounding farms of Haskeen, Kudus and Pforte also served as reserve grazing areas during the lesser droughts of 1988-9 and 1991-3. The history of Ursulla's herd loss and herd re-building over this late period are typical and reflect broader, aggregate figures. In

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<sup>23</sup> See Appendix 8: Livestock and farmer population statistics of individual farms in Spitzkoppe Ward, 1988 - 1995.

1988 she owned 43 LSUs; by 1991 this had grown to 106 LSUs; due to drought during the following two years her herd was reduced to 23 LSUs; and had recovered to 59 LSUs by 1995.

Ursulla's experience mirrors that of many other stock farmers in Damaraland, and Spitzkoppe is typical of many rural settlements in this regard. The communalization of Spitzkoppe as a result of the Odendaal Plan resulted in a social transformation in regard to place, but very little changed with regard to land-use. If anything, livestock numbers have been significantly reduced with the advent of communal farming although the year to year fluctuation in animal numbers continues. Studies from other localities in Damaraland confirm that very little differentiates communal and commercial farming systems in this arid environment apart from the obvious fact that communal systems support a far higher number of farmers with smaller herds (Kambatuku 1995). Furthermore, similar patterns of mobility, herd ownership and settlement exist throughout the study area as well as in the northern Odendaal farms (Sullivan 1996b).

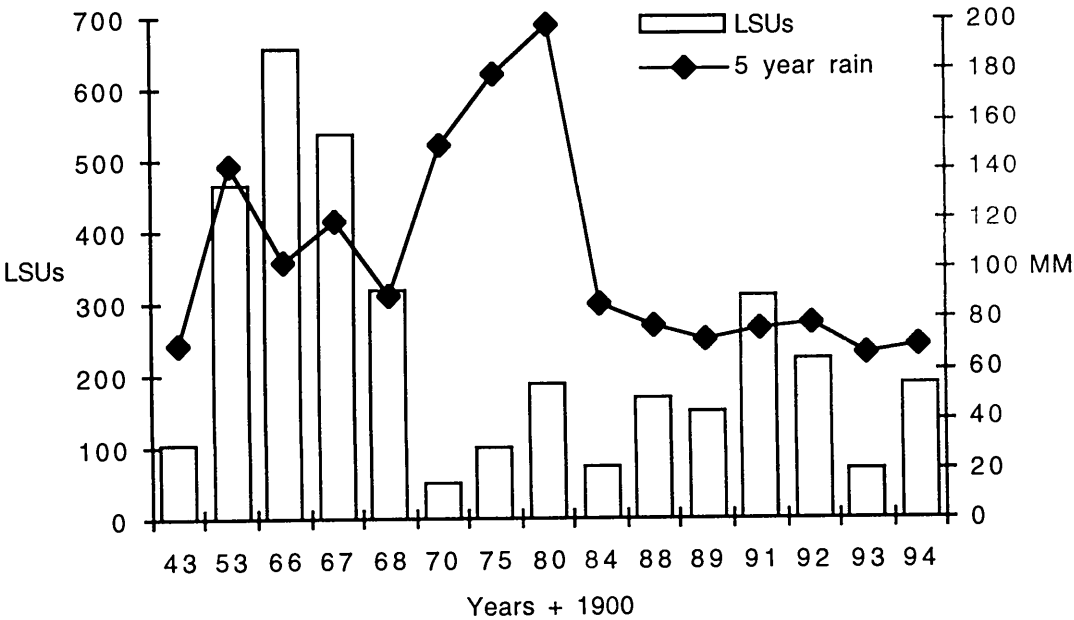


Fig. 14: Comparison of stocking rates (LSUs) with rainfall (5 year running mean)<sup>24</sup> for Spitzkoppe, 1943 - 1994. Low stocking rates between 1970 and 1980 are a reflection of the hiatus occasioned by the process of communalizing this commercial farm

<sup>24</sup> Based on the rainfall records of Usakos, Ketelbank and Sandamap North.



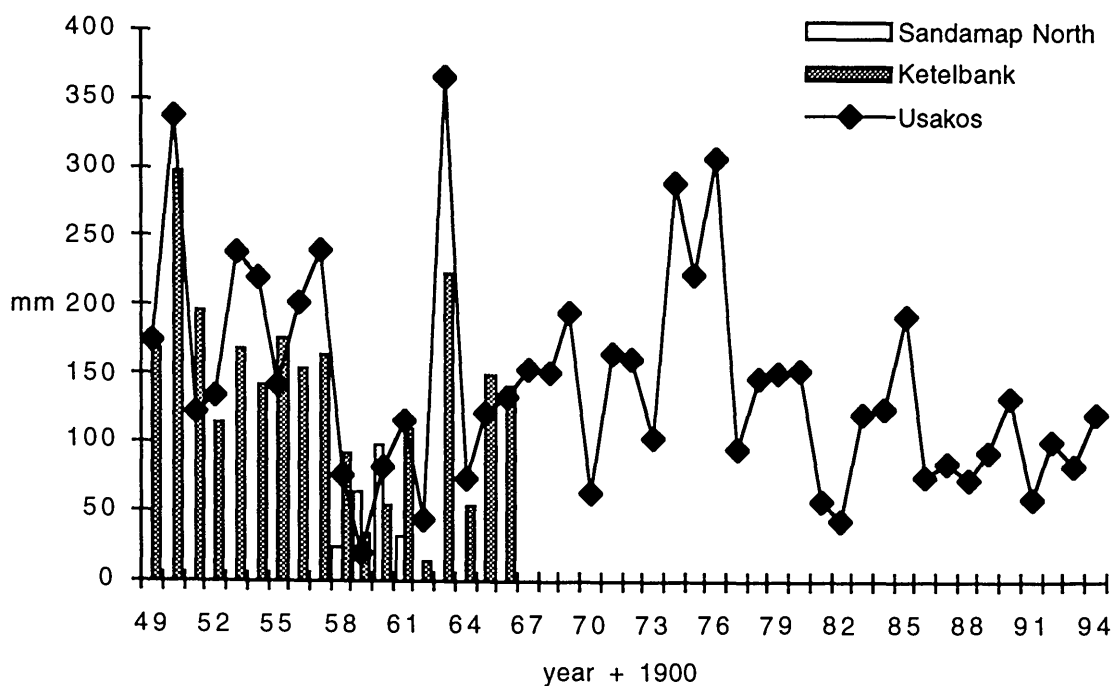


Fig. 15: Annual rainfall at stations adjacent to Spitzkoppe 1936 - 1995.

### *Aerial photographs*

Matched aerial photos of the Spitzkoppe area cover the period spanning 1958 to 1981. The photo taken in 1958 records a landscape under commercial ranching, at the end one of the longest periods of above average rainfall in this area during the 20th century. Five consecutive drought years between 1958 and 1962 were followed by a period of 19 years of rainfall at levels consistent with the long-term mean: the photo taken in October 1981 depicts this landscape during the first year of what was to become the devastating drought of the early 1980s.

Fifteen sites were selected, based on a random sample radiating from the central farm house and kraal of Spitzkoppe and extending outwards for up to five kilometres. Four of these were riverine, nine examined the veld at various distances from the farm's central water point and two controls compared vegetation on granite outcrops and alluvial plains. In addition to these, six matched ground photo sites were examined within this radius. Approximately seven square kilometres were analysed for tree and shrub density change within a total photo area of over 60 square kilometres.

The control sites (wooded terraces near 'Bushman's Paradise' at the east end of the Pontoks and plains to the north west of Spitzkoppe) show no

change in tree and shrub density. Overall, a slight decrease in veld woody vegetation density is discernible (-2%) outside of the 1 kilometre radius of the farm house although five veld sites did show a slight increase in density (+2% to +5%), but these were situated immediately outside of the farm's 500 metre radius piosphere, in heavily grazed, disturbed ground. Tree and shrub decreases in relatively stable (undisturbed) veld environments might be caused by the effects of severe drought, and subsequent removal of carcasses by communal farmers for firewood. However, extensive patchiness characterises woody vegetation change in the larger landscape, especially in relation to water courses where both increases (+5%) and decreases (-5%) were observed and might be expected in association with exaggerated effects of increased and decreased run-off from the Spitzkoppe inselberg.

Smaller water courses seem more prone to density decreases than the larger Sandamap River where riparian vegetation up and down stream from the farm house and village show increases in tree and shrub density (+5%). The decrease in riverine vegetation in the stretch of river near the farm house and village (-7%) is possibly due to high or increased ground water extraction. (This accords with evidence of decreases in riparian woodland on dryland sections of the Omaruru River during this time period.) An increase in trees and shrubs in the immediate vicinity of the farm house might be attributed to the interrupted disturbance during the period immediately after commercial farmers vacated Spitzkoppe.

**Table 10: Summary of averaged trends in percentage woody vegetation change at Spitzkoppe in relation to habitat and distance from village (1958 - 1981).**

<b>Spitzkoppe</b>	<b>1958 - 1981</b>
1) River Habitats	
a) Sandamap River at village	-7 %
b) Sandamap R 2 - 4 km from village	-0 to +5%
2) Veld (overall)	-2%
a) < .5 km.	-2% to +10%
b) 1 - 2 km	-2% to +5%
c) 2 - 3 km	-2% to +5%
d) 3 - 4 km. (incl. water courses)	-3% to +3%
3) Water courses >3 km from village	-5% to +5%
4) Controls	±1%

An examination the matched ground photo sites from the perspective of aerial photographs shows that the general decrease in woody vegetation cover during the 1959 to 1981 period is a reversal of long-term trends: the ground photos cover a period extending from 1930 to the present and all show significant increases in tree and shrub density. Patterns of short-term decreases and increases in woody vegetation are occasionally revealed by this comparison and indicates a dynamism in environmental change over longer time spans. For instance, matched ground photo site # 6 which depicts the German trading station at Spitzkoppe in 1896 and again in 1995, shows a significant increase in woody vegetation.<sup>25</sup> However, the matched aerial photos show that in 1958, this site was even more densely wooded and that between 1958 and 1981: up to 40% of this woody cover was lost. This site was used as a temporary kraal by commercial farmers, especially during high rainfall years when surface water and adjacent wells sustained grazing away from the farm bore-hole. It is likely that as a consequence of this, the depletion of trees used for building materials and firewood, and the destruction of young recruits within the communal stock post's piosphere occurred. Since 1981, renewed recruitment has occurred at this site. Five other matched ground photo sites are based on images taken in 1927, 1938, 1949, 1957 & 1965. All but the last of these show that woody vegetation density increased significantly.

### *Summary*

Although the evidence remains sketchy and incomplete, there is little to suggest that substantial or irreversible degradation has taken place during the periods covered by both the ground and aerial photos of Spitzkoppe. Many of the observed changes in tree and shrub density can be attributed to long-term rainfall patterns (consistent with the analysis of ground photos taken before 1950), the effects of disturbance in promoting recruitment of woody vegetation, the dynamic response of riparian woodland associated with the ephemeral Sandamap River, water extraction and fluctuations in stocking densities due to both political and climatic factors.

Because the settlement of Spitzkoppe has been relatively recent and less intense in comparison with other locations examined in this study, the

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<sup>25</sup> See Appendix 4.

effects of climate and stocking densities are understandably less pronounced. However, several observations can be drawn from the combined evidence presented above:

- woody vegetation has generally increased since 1930;
- recent decreases in tree and shrub densities correspond with the occurrence of severe drought between 1958 and 1962;
- the interrupted disturbance in the immediate vicinity of Spitzkoppe farm house resulted in increased recruitment;
- disturbance associated with grazing pressure probably accounts for increased patchiness in woody vegetation change up to 3 kilometres away from the kraal;
- there are few signs of degradation associated with intensive human and livestock impacts.

## **Black Range**

### *Land-use history*

Black range lies adjacent to the southern border of Spitzkoppe. It is a 16,600 hectare farm first leased commercially in 1940 and has a history of settlement, stocking density and communal settlement similar to that of Spitzkoppe. In 1996, Black Range was inhabited by ten registered livestock owners residing around the main farm house and three adjacent farm posts. Seven of these stock owners belong to one large extended family related to the first communal settler of Black Range, Ishmael Gawanab. His daughter, Magdalena, who is now in her 50s, owns the largest herd, although her husband, two sons and son-in-law are also registered farmers.

The Gawanab family history has many similarities to those recounted by people living at Spitzkoppe. Ishmael first came here in 1973, having been told by the authorities in Otjimbingwe (where he then resided), to leave the reserve and resettle in Damaraland. Having 'broken' his house and packed all his family's possessions, they and their livestock were transported by truck to a resettlement camp known as !Guxas, just west of the Erongo mountains from where Ishmael began to 'scout out' a suitable place to farm. He found the farm house at Black Range empty and the veld surrounding it lush with grazing, and so made the necessary bureaucratic arrangements to move here, once again with the assistance of the government lorry. Other



'resettled' farmers left !Guxas for Sorris -Sorris, Khorixas, and farms to the north.

We were glad to get a good place to farm - those were good years for us. Our water was plentiful and the two farm dams were always full, but after the drought began in 1981, all this began to change. Since then we have moved several times with our livestock and the water from the bore-hole has become brackish. At present we must water our stock at either one of two farm posts which are several kilometres away. During the big drought, we moved to Leuwater far to the west and survived by feeding our stock from the Ana trees in the Omaruru River. In 1985 we moved to Cameroon, a post to the north where rainfall was good but the water was poor - we survived there another year. Poor rains in 1987 forced us to take our stock south to Stinkbank where the grazing along the Khan River was better than at Black Range and finally, during the drought of 1992 we moved back to Cameroon until the rains came again. Grazing is poor this year (1996) due to few rains - water problems might force us to leave again. (Magdalena Hones; pers. com. 5/3/96).

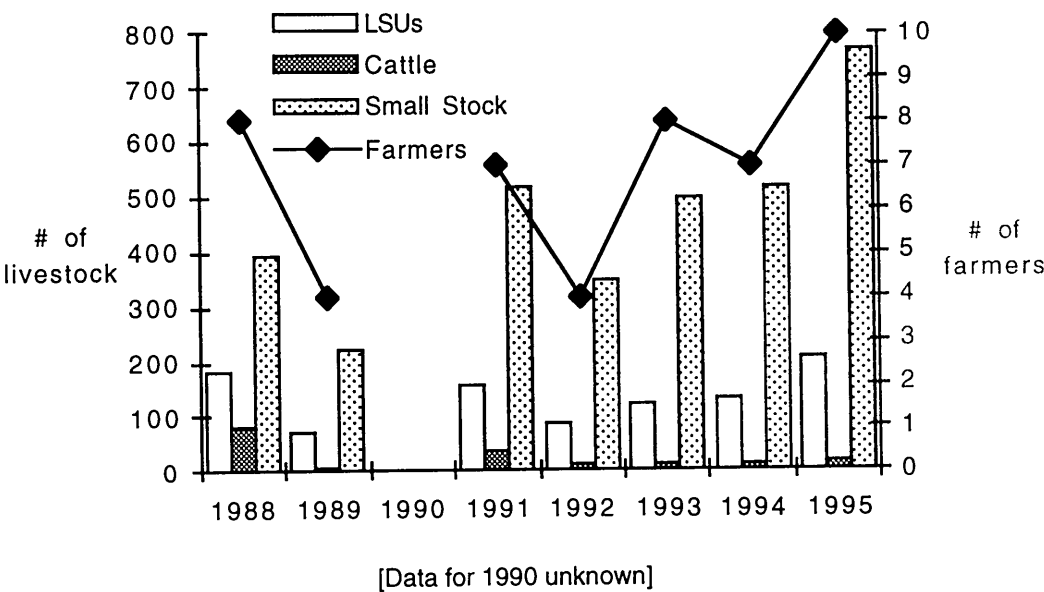


Fig. 16: Comparison of farmers with stocking rates for Black Range, 1988 - 1995.

Recent stocking rates on Black Range farm, similar to those recorded for Spitzkoppe, are well below those of previous commercial farmers. Most farms of this size in the area sustained about 60 head of cattle and 1200 to 1400 sheep and goats; well within the stocking rates recommended by the Department of Agriculture during the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Since 1979

however, a series of low rainfall years has meant that communal farmers have been unable to build herds to these previous levels. Several farm posts on Black Range have been abandoned because of problems with brackish ground water or broken pumps. Two new posts have been established, but these are closer to the central farm settlement and livestock have therefore been restricted to grazing a reduced area of the farm.

*Aerial Photographs*

Eighteen sites were selected in order to compare the more extensive communal farm settlements of Black Range with the settlement of Spitzkoppe. Seven peripheral sites (over 4 kilometres distant from nearest kraal) show less pronounced decreases in cover compared to the areas around Spitzkoppe. Patchiness in directional trends make conclusions regarding overall increases or decreases difficult to justify. Veld vegetation in peripheral areas show variations of between -2% to +5% although others reveal little or no change. The matched aerial photos in the vicinity of the ground photo site on from Black Range<sup>26</sup> (eight kilometres north-east of Black Range farm house: see Figs. 6a & 6b, page 308), shows a patchiness in directional trends of tree and shrub density, with an overall slight increase (+1%).

**Table 11: Percentage change in woody vegetation density by habitat, and distance from settlement: Black Range (1959 - 1981).**

Black Range Farm & Posts	1959 - 1981
1) Veld < 1 km from Farm Posts	
a) permanently occupied	-3% to -10%
b) abandoned	+3%
c) recently occupied	+4%
2) Veld	
d) 1 - 2 km from post	-3% to +5%
e) 2 - 4 km from post	-1% to +5%
3) Water courses < 1 km from Posts	
a) permanently occupied	+3% to -10%
b) abandoned or recently occupied	+3% to +5%
c) 2 - 4 km from farm post	+1% to -3%

<sup>26</sup> See Appendix 4: matched ground photo site #10

Five sites compare changes in the veld surrounding five farm posts, three of which were occupied between 1958 and 1981 (first by commercial and then by communal farmers). Of the remaining two, one has been uninhabited since 1965 and the other was occupied only since then. Woody vegetation within a one kilometre radius of occupied posts showed a decrease in cover ranging from -3% to -10%, an increase of +3% at the unoccupied site, and distinct patchiness in trends of density surrounding the recently occupied farm post with an overall increase of +4%. Examination of the tree densities related to water courses adjacent to these posts show a decrease (-10%) at two of the continuously occupied posts, and an increase (+3% to +5%) at the other posts.

Five further sites were chosen randomly at distances of 1.5 km. from these posts. All but one of these showed small increases or decreases (-1% to +2%) consistent with changes observed in more peripheral areas. Only one showed significant decreases (-15%) and this can be accounted for by the fact that this farm post (Swartklip) was occupied by commercial farmers longer than any other in the area and was continuously occupied by communal farmers during the period of the matched aerial photos. This makes an interesting comparison with the immediate area around Black Range farm house (where Magdalena lives) which shows an increase of both river and veld woody cover (+1% to +3%). Such anomalies might be explained by the occurrence of breaks in occupancy when disturbed areas are rested, thereby enabling the establishment of new recruits.

The analysis of vegetation change on Black Range during the period in question is consistent with that of Spitzkoppe: patchiness characterises the response of the veld in peripheral (control) sites while density decreases along minor water courses are similar to those observed around Spitzkoppe. Few signs of significant decreases which might be interpreted as degradation are evident, while regeneration associated with disturbance and fluctuations in settlement occupancy are consistent with previous observations. Unfortunately, only one ground matched photo site falls within this location; it shows massive recruitment of *Acacia reficiens* during the period between 1927 and 1995. A comparison of aerial photos covering this site indicate that recruitment was checked during the period between 1958 and 1981.

### *Summary*

- long term patterns of woody vegetation change in Black Range are similar to those of Spitzkoppe: significant increases between 1930 and the present and patchiness in directional trends during the short term (1959 - 1981);

- piospheres around farm posts are less pronounced probably due to their smaller populations;

- recruitment and regeneration of woody vegetation in the short-term is dynamic and takes place as a result of interrupted disturbance;

- there are few signs of degradation, except in the vicinity of Swartklip farm post.

### **Sesfontein**

#### *A History of Impending 'Collapse'*

Sesfontein has many features in common with other sites in my sample: a similar rainfall regime to that of Spitzkoppe and Black Range, and a settlement history similar to that of Okombahe and Otjimbingwe. It does however represent an anomaly in my sample set insofar as it supports a plant community dominated by *Colophospermum mopane*, a tree species which is not found in the winter frost prone areas south of Okombahe.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, the history of the Sesfontein area differs markedly from the southern sites described in this study, especially during the later half of the 20th century when the community of Sesfontein remained relatively undisturbed by the social, political, economic and demographic transformations occasioned by colonial domination and the homeland policy. Although Sesfontein was incorporated into the Damara homeland, it was isolated by the fact of being situated north of the veterinary cordon fence and on the fringes of the northern war zone, both of which put a brake on commercial development in the area until very recently. And finally, the available matched aerial photos span a longer and different time period (1943 to 1975) than those used in the study of the southern sites.

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<sup>27</sup> Mopane trees are a vital source of building material, firewood and fodder for browsing livestock and comprise an important, heavily utilized natural resource for the people of Sesfontein, and northern Namibia generally.



The Sesfontein area offers a rare combination of documentary sources for the study of vegetation change in western Namibia: matched ground and aerial photos, fragmentary historical documentation relating to social history (Van Warmello 1951; Fuller 1993; Infoscience 1995), and recent environmental research which assesses the extent of human impacts on woody vegetation (Sullivan 1993a; 1993b; 1994; 1996a; 1997). Also, Sesfontein, like Otjimbingwe and Okombahe, has been cited by planners and range scientists as a classic case of irreversible rangeland degradation and a case study in desertification processes. The following comment asserting that desertification was irreversible was made in 1950, seven years after the first aerial photo was taken:

The whole surrounding area has been overgrazed so thoroughly that only large trees remain in a level plain of bare sand. There are no young trees nor can any raise its head owing to the intensive browsing of the numerous cattle, goats and donkeys perpetually on the look-out for a nibble of green leaf or twig. In the course of time, as the large trees die off one by one and no others take their place it seems that all vegetation must eventually disappear and leave only the enclosed gardens. Needless to say, this over-stocking is the result of a long period of peace and freedom from raiding since the establishment of colonial control, and an utter disregard of the exhortations of officials urging wider dispersal of livestock and avoidance of concentration at Sesfontein (Van Warmello 1951: 39).

Such 'exhortations' have been repeated intermittently by land use planners, nature conservators and rural development consultants ever since. Dr. Malan Lindeque, head of the Etosha Ecological Institute is reported to have made a similar statement "about the environmental and ecological devastation of Damaraland" during the drought of 1992:

[. . . ]the Hoanib river is now a desert landscape; grass, or for that matter any growth other than huge acacias is nowhere to be seen. All and all, it is an ecological system put off balance and in danger of collapsing altogether. The only way that something can be done about this, is to have fewer [. . . ] livestock (Menges 1992).

A more recent consultant's report regarding sustainable development in the Sesfontein area states:

The heavy utilization of the woody stratum by livestock will have consequences over the medium and long term. These areas [around Sesfontein] can in fact be classified as ecological disaster areas, while they should be prime rangeland under appropriate management (Infoscience 1994: 21-22)

*Aerial Photographs , Sesfontein 1943/1975*

Eighteen sites were compared from the matched aerial photographs covering an area of between 25 and 50 hectares each and estimates made regarding percentage changes in woody density. Twelve sites were analysed in locations ranging from 2.5 to 7 kilometres away from the centre of Sesfontein village, six in dense woodland (mopane, *Acacia tortilis*, *Salvadora persica*) to the south of the main Warmquelle to Sesfontein road; six sites were located to the north of this road where a gradual transition from open woodland to short sparse shrubland (*Colophospermum mopane*, *Acacia tortilis*, *Salvadora persica*, *Catophractes alexandri*, *Terminalia prunioides*,) is supported by alluvial gravel plains intercut by small watercourses. Finally, six remaining sites concentrate on examining changes around Sesfontein settlement, the gardens and the surrounding springs.

Contrary to the received wisdom, the overall results show a significant increase in woody vegetation between 1943 and 1975, associated with a highly dynamic and 'patchy' environment.

The mopane/acacia woodlands south of the road are more stable further away from the village. At one site, 7 kilometres to the east, average tree density had increased by almost 5%. This accords with the evidence of matched ground photos of this site (Ground photo site # 15) which exhibited similar small increases between 1951 and 1995. Both the aerial and ground photos confirm that disturbance from either human and animal impacts, or extreme climatic events create conditions for the recruitment of trees and shrubs. On the one hand, this can be clearly seen from aerial images showing dense recruitment along animal and human pathways, and on the other, from ground observations of acacia recruitment on the edges of erosion channels and shallow gullies, and a proliferation of mopane seedlings after a season of above average rainfall (as in 1995). Otherwise,

this open mopane/acacia woodland (in proportion of 1:6) exhibits a skewed age structure and seems naturally to favour localised 'patchiness' where open grassland is invaded by acacia with older woodlands thinning out into open grassland again.

This trend of patchy dynamism becomes more pronounced closer to the settlement, almost certainly in response to increased disturbance. Five kilometres from the village, tree densities have increased by up to 20% and at 2.5 kilometres, by up to 70% where bare patches have been invaded by acacia recruits covering several hectares. At other sites 2.5 kilometres to the south of the village, patches of large mature acacias 'thinned out' by up to 40%, with concurrent recruitment of bare areas on the periphery of this ageing stand.

Sites associated with outlying settlements and minor watercourses show the most extreme change almost consistent with the dynamic riparian woodlands described in association with Otjimbingwe, Spitzkoppe and Okombahe. Even sites where the longer lived and slower growing mopane dominate, such as south and west of the village, density has more than doubled in some cases over patches of several hectares.

Sites to the north of the main Sesfontein road can be characterised as short, sparse mopane woodland growing on gradually rising alluvial plains. Here we find a similar pattern of patchy senescence/recruitment, increasing in intensity closer to the village. The most dynamic changes are associated with minor watercourses which run south into the Sesfontein plain. Shrub density in these water channels has typically increased by 2 to 4 times that of the vegetation on the adjacent alluvial plains. Increases on the plains themselves appear to be in the order of +10% to +15%.<sup>28</sup>

Tree and shrub cover has generally increased within a two kilometre radius of Sesfontein, although two areas stand out as having been denuded of tree cover within the village: the clinic/school area and its associated garden; the plains adjacent to and north-east of the German Fort. Both these areas happen to be included in matched ground photos, covering the time span between 1951 and 1995 (Ground photo sites # 12, 13 & 14). Both areas are associated with gardens which were abandoned sometime after the

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<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note, that on the 1943 photo, what appears to be a hunting trap in the shape of a 'V', each leg of which is approximately 1,000 metres long, is located just to the east of the Sesfontein landing strip. Such hunting methods associated with the Damara were described by travellers in southern Namibia during the late 18th century.

original ground and aerial photos were taken. In the first instance, the garden which originally occupied the space where the school hostel now stands, must have become defunct sometime before 1975, probably as a result of the drying up of the fountain after bore-holes and pumps had been installed here. With regard to the area around the German fort, this extensive garden area was also abandoned in 1976 after SADF engineers diverted water from this fountain to new gardens. The matched ground photos show the effects of this sudden diversion of irrigation in the die-back of *Prosopis*, *Ficus* and date palms around the fort. They also show a significant recruitment of *Acacia tortilis* within the old garden area and outside it to the north and east which in 1975 appeared to be over-utilized, over-grazed or degraded in comparison with the 1943 image.

The aerial image from 1975 also records the recent construction of an earth bank flood barrier on the north side of the village, approximately 250 metres from the German fort and almost 1 kilometre in length. This entire area, between the fort and the flood barrier, the barrier itself and the area on the far side of the barrier were heavily denuded and disturbed. By 1995, extensive recruitment of trees and shrubs over 50 hectares of this previously bare land, which is immediately adjacent to the most densely settled part of the village, is testament to the resilience and dynamism of the environment.

Over the last 20 years, coinciding with a period of extreme and prolonged drought, somehow regeneration of several important tree species has taken place in the former gardens, on the flood barrier wall, on plains to both sides of the wall in small water channels and to a lesser extent on the open alluvial plains.

#### *Low altitude aerial photos*

These trends are further confirmed by low altitude aerial photos taken in 1994.<sup>29</sup> Twelve sites were identified in the 1994 photos which correspond with sites analysed in the earlier 1943 to 1975 match. Significant increases and decreases in woody density are observable within a 2.5 kilometre radius of the settlement. Within the village itself, increases are evident around the clinic area (+50%), the upper fountain (+20%), the gardens (+20%) and to the north of the fort (+60%). Decreases have occurred within the village settlement immediately to the east of the gardens (-10%), and depletion of

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<sup>29</sup> Taken by the author in June 1994.



mature acacia in the main eastern settlement (-50%). A similar stand of younger acacia to the west of the village has thickened in density and numbers (+25%).

Woodlands between 1 and 2.5 kilometres from the village show less pronounced changes. To the east, three sites show increases in dense stands of mixed acacia/mopane woodlands (+10% to +25%). To the north, decreases have occurred in the mixed dwarf savanna woodland (-10% to -40%); to the west both increases and decreases are observable in mature woodlands around the Herero gardens and fountain (+5% to -10%).

Judging by the photographic evidence, the environment is not on the edge of collapse. A complex mosaic of recruitment, exploitation and senescence across time, is reflected in space as dynamic patchiness. The permutations of vegetation change brought about by variations in available ground water, soil characteristics, climatic events, species morphology, and intensity of exploitation are far too complex to analyse using this simple image comparing methodology. A village piosphere is noticeable, especially with regard to ephemerals and the prevalence of *Zygophyllum* spp.; and while it has not been possible to address the question of species diversity in this study (and the depletion of heavily utilized species close to the settlement) tree and shrub recruitment is highly dynamic within this disturbed area. This is highly indicative of environmental resilience given that the village has been permanently inhabited by about 800 people during this time. Given this intensity of settlement, it is surprising that depletion of natural resources is not evident in significant decreases in tree and shrub density.

**Table 12: Percentage woody vegetation change by habitat, site location, distance from centre of village: Sesfontein, 1943 - 1975; 1975 - 1994.**

Site # & location relative to Sesfontein	distance km.	1943 - 1975	1975 - 1994
1) tortilis/mopane veld, ESE (ground matched site #)	7	+5% +20 disturbed	
2) tortilis/mopane veld, ESE	5.5	+20% young recruits	
3) tortilis/mopane/terminalia veld, ENE	5.5	+3% plains +50% streams	
4) low shrub/grassland, ENE	4	+30%	

Site # & location relative to Sesfontein	distance km.	1943 - 1975	1975 - 1994
5) tort/mop/term, ENE, water course	4.5	+60%	
6) mop/term, (near landing strip), ENE, water course & plains	3.5	+10%	
7) tort/mop, (near road), E	2.5	-25% to +100%	+15%
8) tort/mop, (near road), ESE	2.5	+70%	+10%
9) tort/mop woodland, SSE	2.5	-40% woods +20% on edge	
10) shrub/grass, NE	2.5	+20% overall -10% old kraal	-40%
11) acacia/tort, W (near Herero gdns	2.5	+50%	+5%
12) mop/tort, SW, (S of road)	2.5	+65%	0%
13) (thick woodland) plains, S	2.5	+20%	
14) tort/mop, WSW, alluvial plains	1	+60%	+25%
15) ficus/tort, NW, Uri-rita spring head	1	+40%	+20%
16) tort/mop, N (north of fort) Ground photo site #13 & #14	1	-25% to -70%	+60%
17) village, E, plains adjacent gardens a) shrub/grass b) acacia/shrub c) mature tort.	.5	+60% -30% +80% -5%	-10% +10% +25% -50%
18) tort/ficus, W, clinic/school area Ground photo site #12	0.1	-50% at school +10% at clinic	- +60%
19) ficus/tort, gardens	0.1	+10%	+20%

Two sets of aerial photographs span the years 1943 to 1994. Corresponding rainfall data show that the two decades prior to 1975 were characterised by above average rainfall and it is likely that the previous period (1943 - 1954, for which data is not available) followed trends of high rainfall recorded at stations further to the south and east. Only four out of

the last 16 years record above average rainfall. While the human population of the settlement has remained relatively stable throughout this period,<sup>30</sup> livestock numbers have varied considerably due to drought events. During the drought of 1940-41, up to 40% of livestock in Sesfontein died (Van Warmello 1951), similarly, the severe drought which began in 1977 reduced the total herd by 80% (Infoscience 1994). It is likely that a similar pattern of herd reduction occurred during the four drought years of 1959 to 1962. This extreme fluctuation of stocking densities related to rainfall over relatively short periods must account for many of the characteristics of vegetation dynamics around the settlement.

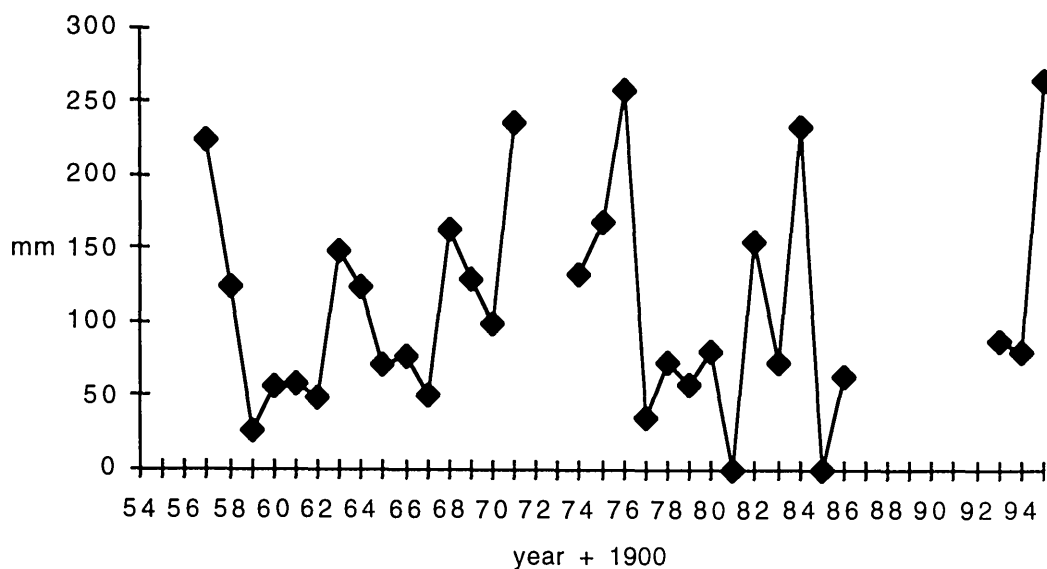


Fig. 17: Annual rainfall - Sesfontein, 1954 - 1995.

### Summary

The evidence presented in this short study of Sesfontein stands in direct contradiction to the assumptions which have been traded as common currency in Namibia's past and present environmental debates: the significance of this unequivocal photographic evidence is that it supports a recent paradigm shift in ecological models necessary to understand this dynamic, arid environment.

The general observations which have been drawn from this analysis of aerial and ground photos should be seen in relation to the work of Sullivan

<sup>30</sup> The population of Sesfontein was 785 in 1947 (Van Warmello 1951). In 1991 it had risen to 985 (National Planning Commission 1994).

(1993b; 1997) who has conducted detailed and controlled vegetation surveys in the neighbouring settlement of Khowareb in order to ascertain the effects of human and livestock impacts on woody vegetation within 5 kilometres of the settlement. Her analysis confirms the expectation that woody species richness would be negatively affected by over-utilization. However, she draws attention to the issue of scale in vegetation analysis which:

highlights the danger of drawing conclusions regarding human impacts on vegetation from a survey which essentially only confirms the use of woody vegetation resources at a small, local scale (1997: 19).

Furthermore, the conceptual framework which has (mis)informed so many past and present judgements on environmental degradation, is wholly inappropriate in understanding Sesfontein's dynamic environment. The evidence itself calls for another explanation of how the environment responds to extreme climatic events:

[ . . . ] it may be more accurate to think of woody species as dependent on intermittent and environmentally-driven establishment events which would result in a naturally skewed population structure, and possibly override the significance of the type of small scale utilization activities [which are practised in Khowareb and Sesfontein] (ibid.).

Finally, as Sullivan also points out, the inhabitants of such settlements, rather than being thought of as mindless exploiters of the natural environment must be given some credit for the conservation and resource management practices which are implicit to the evidence presented here.

## **Conclusion**

This environmental history of six settlements in western Namibia is at odds with the generally accepted theory that over-stocking, insecure land tenure, excessive natural resource utilization and inappropriate farming systems has caused environmental degradation or desertification. The definition of these terms has been debated and revised continually throughout the twentieth century; the history of this debate is associated with changing political ideologies and paradigm shifts underlying ecology, economics and social science. For the purpose of this discussion, the latest formulation of desertification as "land degradation in arid, semiarid and dry subhumid



subhumid areas resulting mainly from adverse human impacts" (UNEP, quoted in Thomas & Middleton 1994: 10) is sufficient. In the context of the study area, this definition would imply that signs of desertification would be manifest in reduced livestock productivity, depleted woody vegetation, loss of species diversity, erosion and soil loss. The evidence presented in this study indicates that all of these processes might be observed in the short term, but are quickly reversed as a result of reduced stocking levels after drought. This study indicates that woody vegetation in such highly stochastic arid environments is 'patchy', even in the absence of intense human impacts. Disturbance in the form of either climatic or human and livestock impacts tend to increase the effects of this tendency to 'patchiness': resilience in recovery, recruitment and regeneration in response to heavy utilization of vegetation would seem to be a defining characteristic of this environment, up to certain limits. That these limits are far higher than previously accepted, is one of the most important results of this analysis.

The relationship between long-term rainfall averages and impacts from humans and livestock appear to have conspired in such a way as not to have effected wide-spread signs of degradation. If anything, the effects of climate can be seen to account for woody vegetation change across the landscape generally. In spite of the fact that many anomalies exist in the evidence due to the complexity of factors affecting environmental change, the matched ground photos over long periods and aerial photos covering short periods confirm this general trend. When coupled with the social, economic and political histories of specific localities, the case for climate change as the dominant factor affecting trees and shrubs within an inherently resilient environment at disequilibrium, challenges the wide-spread perception that the landscape of western Namibia is a product of prolonged processes of desertification.

The research presented in this chapter is necessarily fragmentary and the data collected from fieldwork, only partially analysed. Many questions have been raised which merit further research and analysis, but which fall outwith the scope of this thesis. In highlighting the usefulness of combining various 'common sense' methodologies as a way of gaining insight into the past, I hope to convey the complexity inherent in this environmental history. Each location studied has yielded up a set of conditions which are place specific; analysed together, they compliment and augment each other in a way which makes broader, regional interpretations possible. But these

interpretations are necessarily confined to the arid livestock farming areas situated in the highly specific socio-economic, climatic and vegetation zones of former Damaraland and Otjimbingwe - they do not necessarily apply to other areas of Namibia. Nevertheless, the insights gained from this brief overview should give pause to planners, policy makers and development workers who at present tend to bracket environmental issues and development policy together within a conceptual framework which ignores highly specific local processes within an undifferentiated national context. The relevance of this environmental history, especially in relation to current land reform and development policy, will be advanced in the next and final chapter.

## **PART IV**

## **CONCLUSION**

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

History is always being begun anew; it is always working itself out, striving to surpass itself.

Fernand Braudel (1977:115)

The images and narratives which have been presented in this thesis are necessarily incomplete; they are ultimately inadequate to the task of unravelling all the contingencies which history has brought to bear on the lives of the people of this study. The pathways of history may be broadly constrained by general principles of environmental, economic, or cultural determinants, but the quirk of contingency has so much room for manoeuvre within these boundaries that our grasp of the whole is always elusive. The story of an individual's life, the profile of a village, or the chronicle of a homeland, can all establish plausibility by example, but cannot make a complete case. For this reason, several epistemological frameworks have been loosely interwoven in this thesis in order to present a series of images and narrations which elucidate communal life in Damaraland from a number of perspectives.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was struck by the layering and co-existence of disparate cultural, historical and global influences on the lives of people among whom I lived. As an outsider, as a foreigner, with numerous qualities which made me different and strange - 'other' - I was but one insignificant manifestation of the inextricable links which exist between Damaraland and disparate people and distant places. Perhaps my experience of living and farming in a remote community in the Scottish Highlands lent much of what I witnessed and participated in, a familiar edge. Or perhaps the remote settlements of Damaraland are linked within the same global processes as those which penetrate highland villages today, all of which are articulated across a multitude of temporal and spatial scales. The fact of our inter-connectedness underscores the difficulties inherent in writing about 'other' people and 'different' places. It implies questions concerned with discourse and power, about the effects of representation and the limitations of discursive practices. In the same way as identity, history, place and even ecological processes associated with Damara life elide

totalising theories of artificially bounded holism, so too does this thesis. In the end, there can be no final sense of closure in relation to the 'intractable reality' of communal life in the former homeland of Damaraland. One of the aims of this thesis has been to illustrate and confirm this fact.

Throughout this thesis I have focused on showing how, and in what form, discourse has been effective in shaping the lives of the subjects of this study. I have sought to illustrate, from the perspective of communal farmers and their families, how political discourse, social practice and environmental conditions have been effective in creating a *habitus*, a 'second nature' which informs and patterns social life, and how this is played out between individuals who occupy disparate and competing subject positions. While there can be no overarching master narrative as to who the Damara are, and no fixed and impermeable boundaries as to identity and place, certain parameters can be drawn within discursive systems which *represent* social life and have a direct bearing on the future of this former homeland.

In this final chapter, I will highlight some of the issues raised throughout this thesis pertaining to the politics of representation. How we see each other is determined by a variety of non-discursive factors, without which our creativity, imagination and experience of the world would be immeasurably impoverished. Our perception of each other is also determined by discursive systems of knowledge which cloth and give substance to our social world in ways which are often taken for granted and accepted as fact. This conclusion will review some of these more tangible, prosaic and academic discursive topics: the use of the concept 'culture' to describe and explain social behaviour; and the effects of concepts of 'development' as they are played out through government policies and institutional frameworks.

## **How We See Each Other**

The photographers of Okombahe portray themselves, their families and neighbours as inhabitants of a world imbued with a rich confusion of disparate cultural influences. The seemingly fragmentary and dislocated artefacts of global processes - the trappings of colonialism, the world economy, the mass media - are naturalised and appropriated within a specifically localised and historically contingent environment. I was first made aware of the extent of this interpenetration of the global and local



during my first few weeks in Namibia, when I was introduced to a family in a small settlement in Damaraland and spent the evening with them watching television. We viewed news coverage of Jonas Savimbi's treachery in the civil war of Angola, a Jacky Chan Kung-fu movie from Taiwan and the Cosby Show from the USA with varying degrees of credulity and enjoyment. It was my own sense of dislocation which was interesting, rather than the fact of the co-existence of these images in the home of a rural Damara family. Such glossy media images purveying world events, the affluent consumption of American middle-class life, fantasies of violence and honour, projecting alien identities and new symbols of status, are symptoms of, and agents for, the social change which affects almost all of the world's 'peripheral' regions today. Walk along the dusty tracks of any village or town in Damaraland and you will hear the global culture blaring out of battery-driven tape machines, radios and occasionally televisions. The black urban youth culture of Los Angeles' rap groups, such as Snoop Doggy Dogg and Niggers With Attitude are intermingled with the Rastafarian idealism popularised by Jamaica's Bob Marley whose lyrics and rhythms are echoed by London's UB40<sup>1</sup>, South Africa's Lucky Dube and Namibia's Ras Shehan; the sentimental English love songs of Phil Collins, the raw and raunchy Mbaquanga from South Africa's townships and the rich harmonies of Southern African gospel choirs jostle with Namibian adaptations to all these international styles and subcultures. Videos of "Cry Freedom" and "Biko" form the subjects of passionately discussed political mythologies; the daily soaps of middle class South Africa are beamed into Damaraland's eight-hundred-odd televisions<sup>2</sup>, setting the imaginations of both young and old free to migrate across the contemporary moral and emotional landscapes created by this rich confusion of global culture, made ever more rich by the technologies of mass communication. The latest in hip dress and wicked hair styles are avidly appropriated from ubiquitous American TV programmes, fashion mags, mail order catalogues and the

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<sup>1</sup> On the few occasions when I tried to explain that UB40 was the number of a form which unemployed youth in Britain must fill out in order to receive living and rent allowances from the state, this information was met with incredulity and incomprehension on the part of Damara youth. The wealth implied by this generous social-security system was indeed, 'a world away'.

<sup>2</sup> This figure is derived from the National Population and Housing Census of 1991 (1994). Most of these are located within towns such as Khorixas and are owned by teachers, civil servants and local business men. There were probably no more than ten televisions in the entire village of Okombahe and in smaller rural settlements they are very rare.

latest displays from Windhoek's retail clothes stores. Hair-straighteners and skin lighteners are only the most obvious symptoms of a generalised racial hegemony which is promoted and consumed in this distant outpost of a predominantly white cosmopolitan fashion industry.

Many of Damaraland's inhabitants have, at one time or another, lived in other parts of Namibia. Some have worked in South Africa, or been in exile in neighbouring countries during Namibia's war of independence. Increasingly, training programmes for local officials involve exchanges taking them to other African countries as far afield as Eritrea. A hand full of men and women have obtained degrees from British universities, many others received training and skills from eastern European countries, the Soviet Union or Cuba.

The photographers of Okombahe have conveyed some sense of this diverse admixture. However, there is a danger that their portrayal of contemporary life, cemented by an overwhelming sense of the present and centred upon one locality, might convey a false sense of stasis and geographical boundedness. This illusion of permanence must be weighed against the fact that the photos and their authors' narratives are already a historical record, and as such, are subject to the same depredations of interpretation and ideology as any other historical construction. In Chapter 1, I argued that visual representation might be treated as a valid ethnographic form, a distinct source of knowledge conveyed through the physiognomic and mimetic, but in the final analysis, these photos are also subject to the same constraints which limit all discursive mediums: "there can be no object of knowledge, or process of knowledge in general, outside of discursive systems" (Tagg 1988:24).

So how does one begin to explain the diversity contained within these images of Okombahe, the apparent seamless continuity balanced against the signs of change. How can the poverty, social disrapture, dysfunction and dis-ease be made sense of alongside the affective bonds, the humour and resilience which both photographs and narratives convey? Ethnographic discourses have played a heavy-handed role in the justification of colonial policies; they continue to do so in less overtly political forms within the evolving polity of a notional democratic, socialist state apparatus. One example of this can be found in the speech made by the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the opening of the Okombahe photography exhibition. Here we were treated to a constellation of images and metaphors couched in the

language of ethnic, cultural and class analysis, commonly conjured up in Namibia as a means to interpret the present, in terms of the past. 'Nature, cattle-thieves and various other mid-night robbers' serves as a metonymic reference to more pervasive and overarching discourses which have been deployed (and continue to operate) in the service of explaining Damara identity and social behaviour which ultimately justify political actions. Much of this thesis has been concerned with showing the limitations inherent in such discursive systems, based on unfounded assumptions relating to the causes of poverty, social fragmentation and political dislocation.

What then are the causes of poor living conditions, social dysfunction and the uncertain political status, which characterises what might be conceptualised as a 'pathology' of Damaraland's 'rural ghetto' mentality? It is all too tempting to see these symptoms in terms of 'cultural preference', a kind of endemic predisposition based on inferences of 'cultural choice', a historical backlog which is perpetuated and reproduced through its own inertia, rather than being seen as the logical outcome of continuing material constraint. In viewing the photographs from Okombahe, how can we avoid 'confusing poverty with art or culture'?

### **The Culture of Poverty**

The 'culture of poverty' debate, begun by Oscar Lewis in the 1950s and 60s, exposes many of the weaknesses of such a culturalist stance. The 'culture of poverty' was defined by Lewis as "a way of life shared by poor people in given historical and social contexts" (Jackson 1989:30) and its characteristics correspond with many aspects of social life in Okombahe. Such features include: a strong sense of marginality, powerlessness, dependence and inferiority; a lack of effective participation in the major institutions of the larger society; minimum organisation beyond the nuclear and extended family; the absence of childhood as a prolonged and protected stage in the life cycle; early initiation into sex; free unions or consensual marriages; and a trend towards female or mother-centred families (Lewis 1965 xlv-xlviii). Lewis maintained that the 'culture of poverty' was 'a relatively thin culture' permeated with pathos, suffering and emptiness. This 'poverty of culture' is one of the defining aspects of the 'culture of poverty'.

Such a view of impoverishment and impoverished people, fails to acknowledge the positive response of the poor to their low economic and social status. They do not inhabit a closed system, particular to the slums or urban (and rural) ghettos, but rather these conditions are a necessary corollary to the wider system within which they live: they do not participate, simply because on the whole they have been excluded from the major institutions of society. In the 'culture of poverty' school of thought, even the local institutions of the family, the school, and community forums such as the development committee or the local farmers union are implicated in a 'self-perpetuating pathology' of ghetto culture where systems of control and exclusion are replicated and reflected within a 'vicious cycle of poverty' operating within a local framework (Wilson 1987:4). Family break-down and female headed households are described as symptoms of the 'culture of poverty' wherein culture itself is passed on from generation to generation through the effects of this poverty and the marginalisation on its children, who, by the time they are six or seven "have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of the changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime" (Lewis 1965:xliv). Single-parent families, out of wedlock births, female headed households are all seen as evidence of 'social dislocation' and part of a 'tangle of poverty' (ibid.). And because leadership structures are weak, they therefore provide few lasting role models. Such ascriptions of the culture of poverty are commonly evoked in order to explain the lack of moral and hierarchical structure manifest in Damara 'communities' not only by non-Damara Namibians who associate themselves with different ethnic, class or language based identities, but by the Damara themselves. Such is the power of the myth. But culturalist explanations of the perpetuation of poverty, and the 'dysfunctional' manifestations of social and economic behaviour as imputed cultural attributes, are inadequate because they tend to conflate 'culture' with 'society': they mask the political in terms of the cultural. It is a theoretically flawed analysis that ignores the very structures of inequality and power it seeks to address.

In contrast, a cultural-materialist approach to poverty and social marginalisation concentrates on the economic basis of society: on modes and relations of production, where the 'superstructure' of culture is determined by the 'base' of economic relations. Such arguments relating to the relative

autonomy of culture and the extent to which relations of production determine patterns of social interaction, go to the heart of debates which have dominated the pages of anthropological journals in recent years. Numerous theoretical positions have been fiercely fought over in what has become known as the 'Kalahari Debate', especially with regard to the meaning of socio-economic and cultural definitions of people conceptualised as hunter-gatherers, herders, agriculturalists, peasants and proletariat.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, since anthropological classifications of cultures based on racial stereotypes (now transformed into the politically correct categories of 'language groups') have evolved within a Southern African regional analysis differentiating Khoisan from Bantu, the meaningfulness of the term 'culture' itself is thrown open to question. One of the reasons which might account for the ambiguous effects of such European based systems of knowledge on the Damara themselves might be the fact that, by and large, they comprise an ambiguous category within such systems of classification. Because the Damara might be said to have attributes common to Khoisan, Bantu, hunter-gatherers, herders, peasants, and proletariat, they have been conceptualised as being 'different' and in a paradoxical non-class of their own.

Just as there are no longer any 'true' hunter-gatherers for anthropologists to study, so too have all other 'pure' categories based on language, economic relations, race or ethnicity become permeated with the effects of the hegemony of the nation state, global economy and the culture of the mass media, having thereby been rendered meaningless, apart from the consequences which such discourses perpetuate in defence of political boundaries of identity and relations of power. From this perspective, the incipient irony underscoring such debates, gives the Damara pride of place as one of Southern Africa's original 'modern' societies, a classic case study in the effects which incursions of merchant capital and colonialism have had on all peoples of Southern Africa, resulting in varying degrees of acculturation, resistance, exclusion, integration and fragmentation. Defined as Namibia's original peasants/proletariat, many aspects of Damara social organisation retain elements which might be traced to their hunter-gatherer, herding and trading past. They share a common fate with many other marginalised 'hybrid' groups in Southern Africa: as a reified social or cultural category,

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<sup>3</sup> I have avoided becoming enmeshed in this complex, wide-ranging theoretical academic debate which dominated the anthropological journals concerned with hunter-gatherer studies and the history of Southern Africa during the early 1990s. For further references to this debate, see the Introduction of this thesis, pages 5 to 7 and footnote 3.



they have been 'peripheralised', and to a large extent rendered invisible. Unlike the 'pure' representatives of mankind's foraging and herding ancestors, which anthropologists have 'discovered' in the Bushmen, or the Himba, the Damara have more in common with 'a lost way of life' typical of marginalised peasant societies of Europe during the 19th century and throughout the developing world in the twentieth.

But these things we ignored, relatively speaking, because we didn't come all the way around the world to see them. We could have stayed near home and seen people behaving as a rural proletariat, while nowhere in the Kalahari and a few other remote locations allow a glimpse of the 'hunting and gathering way of life' (Nancy Howell quoted in Wilmsen 1989:35).

In writing about the Damara, (or more accurately, about the people of Okombahe and Damaraland), I have tried to maintain a sensitivity to the social and historical context in which they now live. It seems futile to continue to use the outmoded conceptual categories of anthropological classification on people who perhaps have more in common with marginalised societies throughout the developing world, in a generic sense, than they do with any imputed socio-economic or ethnic category of Namibia's recent past. I have tried to show that by focusing on specific ongoing processes - environmental conditions, migration, property relations, the embedded and embodied meaning of place - a sense of what determines the reproduction of social life in Damaraland might constitute a contemporary cultural geography. Culture is more than a determinant which arises in relation to a static mode of production; culture is alive to historical experience, and while it is not to be confused with poverty, it finds expression there, as "a realised 'signifying system': a set of signs and symbols that are embedded in a whole range of activities, relations, and institutions, only some of which are 'cultural', others being overtly political, economic or generational" (Williams 1981:207-9) In writing about Damaraland, I have tried to convey something of the structure of feeling with which it is imbued. In the same way as I argued that the photographs convey this sense through the visual, I have tried to convey the discursive structures within which the Damara live, a sense of the continual flux of meaning and value within affective relationships, adaptations to economic and environmental conditions as well as to expressions of ideology or world views.

This 'habitus' of embodied history, shared dispositions and common practice can be conceived as being structured without in any way being the product of obedience to rules (Bourdieu 1990b:53-56). Social practice makes sense within its own terms as 'second nature', the internalised product of a history of marginalisation and environmental constraints around which social interdependence is continually contested and re-negotiated. The 'common sense', 'second nature' or habitus of social interaction is expressed in pastoral practices which rely on flexible conceptual categories of kinship, property and relations of exchange. It is this aspect of the social economy of Damaraland which the broad ethnographic and historical narratives of Part I and II eventually focus on. It is impossible to see the culture within which pastoral practice exists as being separate from subjective experience, and it cannot be understood without reference to structural social constraints. Social behaviour cannot be understood without acknowledging that individuals operate within social codes which they themselves did not invent, but at the same time invention and improvisation create a changing environment for every cultural code.

### **Pastoralism, Development and Desertification**

Pastoralism constitutes the basis upon which Damaraland's social economy exists and reproduces itself. Individuals and communities have evolved a variety of pastoral strategies in order to adapt to the limitations and opportunities which have resulted from colonial policies and environmental conditions. To a certain extent, the Damara have been left to their own devices within these parameters, and have developed highly effective solutions to the recurrent problems of drought, economic hardship and political marginalisation. Since independence in 1990, local political structures which came into being as a response to colonialism have lost their previous legitimacy, leaving communal farmers to work out new organisational structures for coping with environmental and economic constraints. The resulting vacuum in local political control has produced few changes in the way pastoralism is actually practised: mobility, sharing, kinship and exchange relationships based on negotiation and flexibility continue to enable farmers to survive drought and to rebuild their herds. However, this political vacuum is on the verge of being filled by new forms of institutional control: land reform, the privatisation of water, rural

development projects and environmental policies geared towards combating desertification are some of the more obvious and immanent vehicles of this impending change.

The emotive issue of full-scale land reform was first addressed in 1991 at a national land conference where a broad consensus of Namibian interest groups called on the government to implement land redistribution and tenure reform in order to address the huge inequalities in land ownership fostered by colonialism.<sup>4</sup> Since that time, the government has effectively ruled out the possibility of significant changes in the existing order of land ownership, in the interests of national economic stability.

A commercial land reform act<sup>5</sup> was passed in 1995 which does little more than confirm the principle enshrined in Article 16 of the Namibian Constitution, whereby "the state may appropriate property in the public interest on the basis of just compensation" (NEPRU 1991:12). The provisions of the 1995 Act further delineates under what circumstances the state may purchase agriculture land from private owners, on the basis of loosely defined criteria of under-utilisation and excessive or foreign ownership. Expropriation of such land can only take place where the owner and the Minister responsible are unable to agree on the voluntary sale based on just compensation, or the amount the property would have realised if sold by a willing buyer to a willing seller. Given the financial constraints under which the government operates, it is unlikely that this act will be able to effect significant changes in the current pattern of land ownership in Namibia.

A communal land reform act has yet to be finalised, but a draft circulated in 1996 indicated that it is likely to take a form of similar to that of Botswana's land legislation.<sup>6</sup> The draft act provides for the creation of regional land boards, appointed by the Minister of Lands in order to allocate, allot and demarcate communal land. An adjudication board, also appointed by the minister will be empowered to settle disputes and make awards under the provisions of the act. Each regional board will be expected to issue and keep a register of all certificates of consent to occupy communal land which will be provided to all those, who under customary or common law, have a right to do so. Provision is also made for the

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<sup>4</sup> The full implications of the 1991 National Land Conference have been discussed at length elsewhere. See for example: NEPRU 1991; Adams and Devitt 1992; Rohde 1993; 1994; Botelle & Rohde 1995; Sullivan 1996.

<sup>5</sup> *Agricultural (Commercial) Land Reform Act, 1995*. (Government of Namibia 1995d).

<sup>6</sup> Several rough drafts have been 'leaked', the latest version being in 1996.

conversion of rights related to water and development into 100-year leaseholds at the discretion of the President. Furthermore, a prohibition on the publication or disclosure of information directly related to the functioning of the regional land boards will seriously undermine any pretence of accountability relating to the powers which the boards will wield.

The consequences of such legislation for communal livestock farmers in western Namibia could be disastrous. Centralised control, lack of transparency, the power to exclude those who have no prior rights of residence or family connection to communal land, and the power to effectively privatise large areas at the discretion of the President, would be a potential recipe for abuse and increased marginalisation. Other provisions in the draft act give powers to the regional boards to "establish a conservation strategy that will guarantee sustainable natural resources and ensure that productivity of Communal Land in the region is optimised".

Such references to environmental sustainability are common currency in many recent government documents in Namibia. National policies embracing land, agriculture, water, wildlife and rural development are all peppered with politically correct statements supporting the concept of 'community-based natural resource management', 'environmental sustainability' and the need to reverse 'processes of environmental degradation' caused by over-population, over-grazing, lack of appropriate community control etc.<sup>7</sup> Without exception, these policies promote the idea that increased control, in one form or another, is the only solution to social, economic and environmental problems which afflict communal farmers.

These proposed systems of control vary from highly centralised, top-down structures along the lines of regional land boards as formulated in the communal land act, to devolved 'community' water point committees acting as owners of individual bore-holes and water extraction facilities as required by the National Water Policy (Republic of Namibia 1993). The delineation of 'communities' in order to devolve rights over water, grazing and wildlife has met with difficulties over the drawing of geographic and ethnic boundaries.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example: *Report of the technical committee on commercial farmland* (Republic of Namibia 1992:62-4); *Outline of a National land policy* (Republic of Namibia 1996:18-19); *National Agricultural Policy* (Republic of Namibia 1995c: 31-3); *The National water supply and sanitation sector policy of the Government of Namibia* (Republic of Namibia 1993); *Nature Conservation Amendment Act 1995* (Republic of Namibia 1995a); *Namibia's Environmental Assessment Policy* (Republic of Namibia 1994); *Traditional Authorities Act* (Republic of Namibia 1995b:9).

At present, such boundaries are often permeable, 'fuzzy' and complicated by overlapping class, gender and generational factors. Given the uncertain climatic and environmental factors which dominate the socio-economy of such communities, "certain critical ambiguities as to who owns what and can go where provide a degree of fluidity which suits every one's purpose" (Behnke 1994:15). While there is a growing acceptance that mobility is a prerequisite for successful communal farming, especially in drought prone, arid western areas, there have been few attempts to translate the implications of this into suitable models of administrative control.

One of the major obstacles to developing appropriate local natural resource management institutions has been the government's fear of consolidating local power structures on the basis of previously constructed geographical boundaries and ethnic identities. Another has been the disempowerment of 'traditional leadership' structures,<sup>8</sup> leaving a poorly trained, and over-stretched network of civil servants to implement national top-down policies which are effective in some areas of the country and wholly inappropriate and ineffectual in others.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the inability of either the national government or local leaders to control communal land and its natural resources, has resulted in large areas of communal land being fenced off and effectively privatised by a small number of wealthy and powerful individuals. This problem is of minor concern in western communal areas, principally because of the negative financial equation between the costs of fencing and the land's low productive potential. However, other conflicts are occurring as a result of the collapse of 'traditional' controls over rights to land and natural resources: increasing tension within settlements over the control of development assets, the occurrence of stock theft and incursions of larger, more powerful pastoral groups into areas previously inhabited by weaker, less politically cohesive groups is taking place in areas such as former Bushmanland (Botelle & Rohde 1995) and northern Damaraland (Rohde 1994).

The communal farmers union which covers the new administrative unit of Kunene Region has been one of the most effective grass-roots

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<sup>8</sup> The perception that the Damara leadership "has been largely a colonial and apartheid construct aimed at facilitating the process of discrimination, divide and rule and political patronage whereby the participants in the structure and their followers were to an extent the principle beneficiaries" (NEPRU 1991) is common and wide-spread.

<sup>9</sup> The Traditional Authorities Act 1995 (Republic of Namibia 1995b) limits the powers of traditional leader to customary law where it does not conflict with the Constitution. It prohibits traditional leaders from holding political office.



organisations to emerge in northern Damaraland since independence, and as a direct response to such conflicts, is evolving as a local forum where problems over user rights and planning in response to drought can be addressed at a local level. However, many policy makers still view such organisations as vehicles for a politically motivated local elite, and therefore by-pass such community structures when implementing policy decisions. Several examples of project failures in former Damaraland, including attempts at establishing water point committees, community based wildlife and tourism projects and community gardening enterprises, might be attributed to this lack of understanding of what actually constitutes a community and how it functions.

Many of the principles of revised development theory, specifically in relation to pastoral societies in arid environments, have been incorporated into policy formulations, and yet, policy makers remain, by and large, city dwellers who have little first hand knowledge of the social, economic and political realities of communal life. They remain oblivious to the variations which differentiate the pastoral practises and social organisations of people living within a range of environmental conditions across Namibia. Planners seek to create a loose unified structure of resource and tenure rights, which often have more in common with European systems of bureaucratic organisation than they have with indigenous conceptions of resource rights and responsibilities. On the other hand, an abstract concept of 'community', which might have some relevance in terms of planning in the context of a fully developed civil society, is deployed with all its politically positive connotations as a solution to the complex problems of rural development. It is difficult to ignore the euro-centric bias in the extensive use of the concept of 'community', which in a western context is a word normally chosen to denote "experiments in an alternative kind of group-living" (Williams 1976:75).

What is perhaps most threatening to the so-called communities of former Damaraland, is the mounting pressure of government, donor and NGO organisations to promote social and economic policies which are justified on the basis of imputed environmental degradation. Combating desertification has become a national priority in Namibia. In terms of promoting environmental awareness among planners, government officials, development workers and the rural population at large, the Namibian Programme to Combat Desertification (NAPCOD) has been highly effective.

Population growth, poverty and a limited natural resource base pose real problems which development planners must come to terms with in shaping a prosperous and equitable future for rural Namibians; NAPCOD has enjoyed some measure of success in promoting comprehensive strategies to deal with the environmental consequences of these overwhelming structural constraints.

However, the whole premise upon which the desertification programme is based rests upon the assumption that environmental degradation is taking place on a massive scale. A recent NAPCOD policy document states that the exact extent to which degradation is occurring remains uncertain, but goes on to state that "there is an urgent need to reform the policy framework to reduce that land degradation which is undoubtedly occurring" (1996:iii). This document identifies the introduction of "secure, exclusive tenure at the community level" as "the single most important policy reform needed to prevent degradation" (ibid.:iv). The over-utilisation associated with degradation in communal lands is identified as being caused by: insecure tenure; sedentarization; increased pressure caused by fencing and population growth; lack of rights to wildlife and trees.

It was in the context of such immanent shifts in policy aimed at creating a "unitary land system for Namibia" (Republic of Namibia 1996:2) that I felt it imperative to investigate the environmental history of Damaraland. Part III of this thesis touches on some of the issues raised above in relation to the causes of land degradation and finds little, if any empirical evidence to support these contentions. In the past, Damaraland was organised almost as if it were one big farm: security of tenure was not generally an issue, and where disputes over rights to land and natural resources arose, these were dealt with at a local level, and in the interests of all of Damaraland's communal farmers. Sedentarization is not a problem in terms of pastoral resources: Chapters 6, 7 and 8 present ample evidence to the contrary. There is little indication that tenure reform, as proposed in the draft act, will bring any improvements to the socio-economic and environmental processes which attend the growth of rural settlements: if anything, tenure reform is likely to exacerbate the process of sedentarization.

There is not one statement contained within Namibia's Policy to Combat Desertification (MET 1994) which calls for further research into the actual extent, causes and dynamics of land degradation. All these are simply assumed to exist. As I have shown in the case of the communal areas

of western Namibia, pronouncements of severe degradation resulting from insecure tenure, sedentarization, population growth and lack of rights to natural resources are completely unfounded. On the contrary, this research has confirmed the findings of ecological studies from other similar dryland environments. Such ecosystems are subject to "dramatic shifts in character and biomass in response to climatic fluctuations", which are often "reversible as these ecosystems appear to be well-adapted to cope with and respond to disturbance": "vegetation changes alone caused by human actions do not in themselves necessarily constitute degradation" and may easily be confused with natural changes (Thomas & Middleton 1994:160).

Flexibility is the key to planning development in pastoral areas. Blueprint planning and imposed solutions do not work. If planners use a mechanistic approach based on single objectives or simplistic environmental management tools, plans will be rejected and pastoral livelihood potentially undermined. Instead, a more adaptive, process oriented approach to planning is required that builds from an understanding of existing pastoral management strategies and local knowledge of environment and resources (Scoones 1995:29)

### **Politics by Any Other Name**

The desertification 'myth' would appear to be the vehicle for new apparatuses of state control. The colonial policies of 'indirect rule', 'separate development' and apartheid are on the verge of being replaced by equally inappropriate, though less overt forms of centralised political control. If environmental policy becomes enshrined in laws which regulate land tenure rights and the management of natural resources without regard to actual, localised environmental processes or existing forms of pastoral practice and indigenous social structures, there is a grave risk that such laws will create more problems than they solve.

This is not the place to introduce an analysis of the discursive frameworks and institutional conditions within which development and environmental policies are promoted in Namibia. However, the need to establish the underlying motivations which lie behind such discursive systems and to evaluate the effects which these have on the lives of communal populations, lies behind everything I have written about in this thesis. What I have presented has been essentially academic in structure,

and like development discourse or political rhetoric, does not deal simply with 'facts', but with the construction of 'the object of knowledge' itself.

In the introduction I referred to the value laden, interpretive grid which the concept of development embraces, allowing us to not only construct a system of knowledge about the impoverished regions of the world, but more importantly, allowing us to act and change these regions (Ferguson 1990:15). As such it is a political activity and therefore contains within its ambit contests and debates concerning what is 'appropriate' or 'sustainable'. However, its fundamental problematic is rarely disputed: "like 'goodness' itself, 'development' in our time is so firmly entrenched that it seems almost impossible to question it, or to refer it to any standard beyond its own" (Ferguson 1990:xiv). The concept of development is central to the way we organise our concepts, legitimate our political activity and justify our world-views. It bears many generic similarities to the way 'civilisation' was deployed during the 19th century in the imperial pursuits of capitalism and colonial hegemony in these same regions of the world. Throughout this thesis I have drawn attention to the influences which such discourses have had in shaping the political processes and their effects upon the lives of the people of Damaraland. Ethnography, historical and sociological academic studies have been pressed into the service of such 'development' activities, which with hind sight, appear overtly political but were deployed at the time in much the same way as 'development' is today.

It is not my intention to suggest that what I have presented in this thesis is in some way 'value-free', nor has my primary purpose been to suggest alternatives to contemporary development initiatives. One of the difficulties which confronts any researcher into the present reality of Damaraland is the dearth of previous research available, whether this is in the form of anthropological, historical, ecological or development studies. So much which passes for knowledge of the communal inhabitants of former Damaraland and its environment, whether this is related to social structure, history, or pastoral practice, is based on assumptions and innuendo. And where such studies do exist, the question is not so much one of how close the knowledge which they purvey approximates the truth, but rather, what effect this knowledge has on the lives of the people it purports to represent. I have tried to offer some insight into the genealogy of such discourses, to trace their ideological basis and demonstrate the extent to which they have been effective, resisted or appropriated. At the same time, I have sought to

present a study of Damaraland which takes its basis from a hermeneutic perspective of how the Damara see themselves, in the form of their own representations of images and words.

Some of the ethnographic, historical and ecological research presented in this thesis has already entered the public sphere; the question of what real social effects the circulation of such discourse will actually have, remains an open question. Hopefully it will contribute to ongoing academic and development discourses which inform the public debates and political decisions which will ultimately influence the future of the people of this former homeland.

## **The Future**

Much work remains to be done in bridging the social, economic and ideological divide between the people of Damaraland and state institutions, donor organisations and NGOs, all of whose common interests lie in bringing about a more just, stable and equitable future to Namibia as a whole. This thesis has touched on many topics which require further attention from researchers, planners and development activists if this gap is to be bridged in any meaningful or constructive way.

First of all, there is a need to engage local people in research and project implementation, as participants, as writers, photographers, researchers and project personnel. A wealth of talent and knowledge is there to be tapped by anyone with the commitment and humility to do so.

Further ecological research should also be a priority. The environmental history of Damaraland has many insights to offer into the principles underlying the ecology of this arid and semi-arid pastoral landscape: a better understanding of the dynamic interactions of humans and their livestock in this environment is a prerequisite to the implementation of sound environmental and social policy.

So many aspects of the social economy of Damaraland are poorly understood, making it seem almost churlish to list all the possible areas of research related to poverty, health, education and economic development which might serve to benefit the lives of communal farmers and their dependants, many of whom are members of a growing underclass of the absolutely poor. And yet in spite of my insistence that local research holds the key to understanding the specific problems confronting the people of



this former homeland, to a significant extent, change will come from outside Damaraland: from the effects of the global economy; from the development of South Africa as it makes the transition to a democratic regional power; from the sustained growth of the Namibian economy; from the effects of national, regional and international political processes upon which the inhabitants of Damaraland have little or no control; from the impacts of global climate change; from the rate at which population growth is slowed; from any number of unforeseen events, catastrophes and technological break-throughs.

Meanwhile, change in Damaraland is gathering pace in the form of economic development, mass tourism, aid projects, research programmes, land-use plans and government legislation. But the changes which really matter are coming about not just through the interventions of bureaucrats, politicians, aid personnel, researchers or tourists but through the strategies of all those diverse individuals who live and survive in Damaraland, through the actions of those men and women who have something at stake, something to fight for, who resist and transform the existing social order. 'Ordinary' individuals such as the Okombahe photographers, have each in his or her own way adapted to new opportunities, and followed diverse trajectories in order to create a future less subject to the structural limitations in which they have found themselves. Grass-roots organisations such as local farmers unions, village development committees, and women's groups are gradually becoming more effective as they learn to adapt to the new experience of non-racial democracy. Dedicated individuals working within extension, veterinary, medical and educational institutions are actively involved in addressing local issues and solving specific, tactical questions. These individuals are not waiting for the outcomes of research projects, the advice of consultants or the authority of bureaucrats, in order to act. The inhabitants of this former homeland dwell in a multi-faceted social space within which particular realities are generated, contested and transformed through the unfolding of historical contingency, where conceptual and material worlds are inter-dependent and simultaneous. The images and narratives presented in this thesis are a reflection of the way in which individuals take responsibility for and become the authors of their own lives in the context of a social polity, which is the institutional form of historical events, and where history is always striving to surpass itself.

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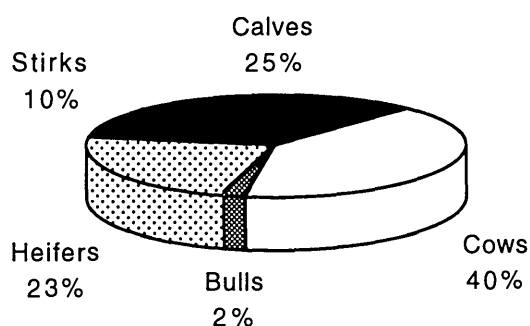
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## APPENDIX 1

### LIVESTOCK HERD STRUCTURE & OFF-TAKE RATES

#### Herd structure: Cattle

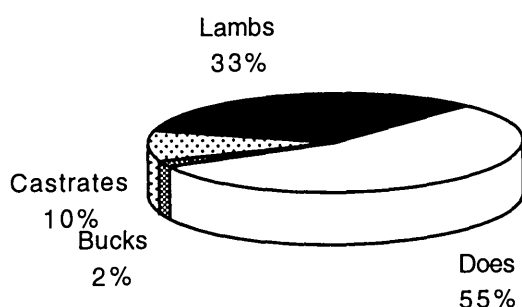
As a percentage of total herd, cows remain constant at about 40% as do bulls at 2%. While total herd numbers declined over this period, due to drought and migration, (dropping 10% between 1992-3 and 20% between 1993-4)<sup>1</sup> heifers as a proportion of total herd increased (from 21% - 26%) while calf numbers each year decreased (from 27% to 22%). Generally, herd structure looks stable, with farmers practising sound economic strategies: tollies/stirks are low at about 10%.



Calving percentages dropped from a high 67% in 1992 to 56% in 1994, showing a high fertility rate during a drought situation.

#### Herd Structure: goats

As a percentage of the total, does average approximately 55%; bucks 2%; castrates 10%; lambs under one year old 33%.



Lambing percentages range from 30% to 60% depending on climatic conditions, averaging around 50%.

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<sup>1</sup> Derived from agricultural census records of Spitzkoppe and Grootberg Wards.

## OFF-TAKE RATES AND INCOME

[Based on median herd size for Okombahe, 1995]

If the median farmer owns an average of 12 LSUs, made up of 20% cattle and 80% goats the following calculation can be made on the basis of the herd structures given above, with an average mortality rate of 10% for adult stock. (Calving and lambing rates are inclusive of mortality rates up until one year of age.)

A cattle herd of only 2.4 LSUs would consist of 1 breeding cow, 1 stirk and 1 calf. Over a ten year period, given mortality and fertility rates the following sales could be expected:

- 1 cull cow @ N\$ 800
- 2 x two year old stirks @ N\$ 1200 each
- 1 calf @ N\$ 600
- 1 LSU mortality

Total = N\$3,200 or N\$320 average per year.

A mixed goat and sheep flock would consist of 27 ewes; 16 lambs; 5 castrates; and 1 buck/ram. Off-take per year while maintaining constant herd size would produce the following:

- 3 cull ewes @ N\$150
- 5 castrates @ N\$ 180
- 2 male lambs @ N\$ 100
- 2 mortalities

Total = N\$1,550

Total income from sale of cattle and small stock =	N\$ 1,870
Minus expenses:	<u>170</u>
Total cash income from livestock =	<u>N\$ 1,700</u>

Of course these calculations are only indicative of income levels for 'average' farmers: climatic cycles and herd-building strategies make such calculations simplistic approximations of long-term average incomes. Furthermore, the equivalent income from milk and skins could add up to N\$ 1,000 per year to this calculation. In addition, donkeys, which have been left out of this equation, are commonly slaughtered and sold locally.

APPENDIX 2

HERD OWNERSHIP BY WARD, DAMARALAND 1993<sup>2</sup>

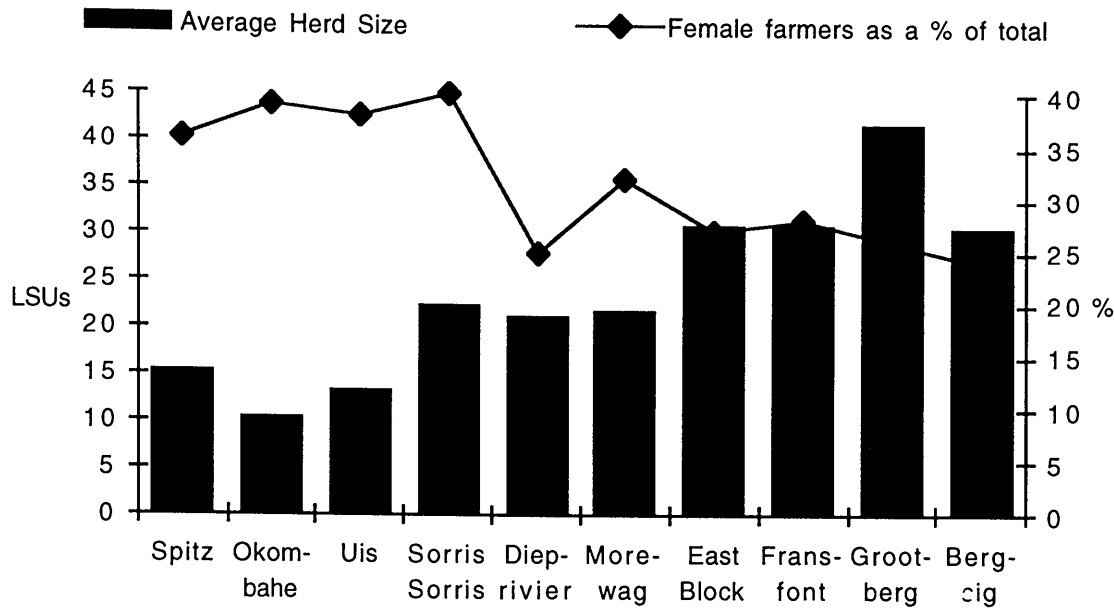


Fig. A2.1: Average herd size and percentage of female farmers by Ward, Damaraland 1993.

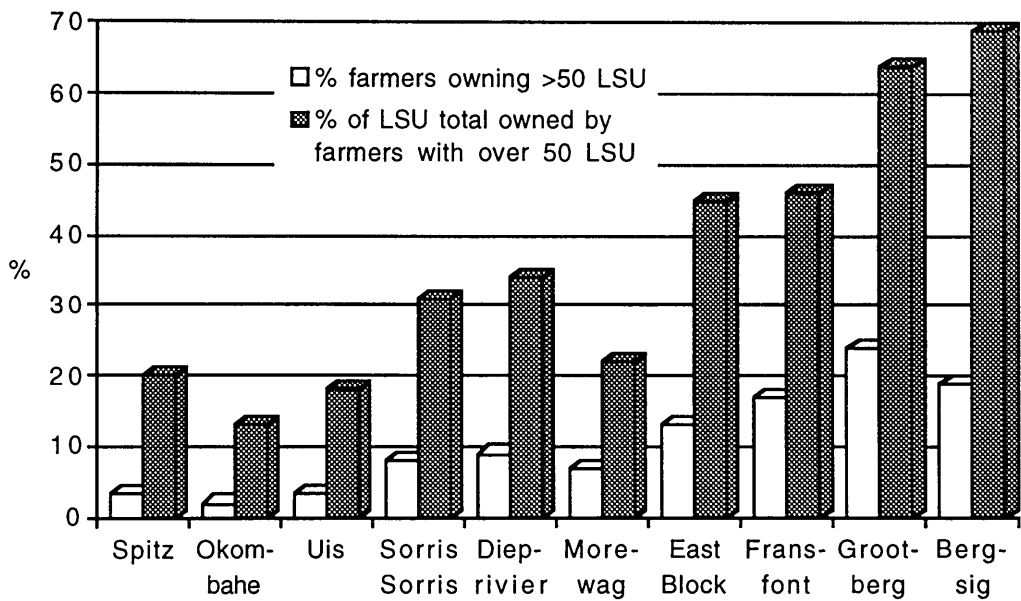


Fig .A2.2: Percentage of farmers owning more than 50 LSUs and percentage of LSU total owned by farmers with more than 50 LSUs, by Ward.

<sup>2</sup> Derived from Agricultural Extension Officer's Livestock Census Reports, 1993.



### **Spitzkoppe**

267 farmers

97 female = 36%

Average herds: 43 goats; 8.5 sheep; 5.3 cattle = **15.5 LSU**

7 farmers own 50-100 LSU (430)

1 farmer owns between 100-200 LSU (109)

1 farmer owns 200+ LSU (298)

2 farmers own 10% of total livestock

9 farmers own 20% of total

271 farmers own less than 50 LSU with average herds of **12.7 LSU**

### **Okombahe**

199 farmers

77 female = 39%

Average herds: 39 goats; 5.4 sheep, 1.6 cattle = **10.5 LSU**

4 farmers own 50-100 LSU (267)

4 farmers own 13% of total livestock

195 farmers own less than 50 LSU with average herds of **9.3 LSU**

### **Uis**

177 farmers

67 females = 38%

Average herds: 36.7 goats; 6.6 sheep; 4.8 cattle = **13.4 LSU**

5 farmers own 50 -100 LSU (331)

1 farmer owns 100 + LSU (100)

6 farmers own 18% of total livestock

171 farmers own less than 50 LSU with average herds of **11.3 LSU**

### **Sorris Sorris**

124 farmers

49 females = 40%

Average herds: 65 goats; 3.4 sheep; 8.6 cattle = **22.4 LSU**

7 farmers own 50-100 LSU (472)

3 farmers own 100+ LSU (884 LSU)

10 farmers own 31% of total livestock

114 farmers own less than 50 LSU with average herds of **12.5 LSU**

### **Dieprivier**

215 farmers

54 female = 25%

Average herd: 58 goats; 4.1 sheep; 8.8 cattle = 21.2 LSU

14 farmers own 50-100 LSU (869)

5 farmers own 100+ LSU (695 LSU)

5 farmers own 15% of total

19 farmers own 34% of total livestock

196 farmers own less than 50 LSU with average herds of 15.3 LSU

### **Morewag (1994)**

225 farmers

72 females = 32%

Average herd: 66 goats; 7.1 sheep; 7.4 cattle = 22 LSU

13 own 50-100 LSU (826 LSU)

2 own 100+ (270 LSU)

2 farmers own 5% of total

15 farmers own 22% of total livestock

210 farmers own less than 50 LSU with average herds of 18.4 LSU

### **Eastern Block**

123 farmers

33 female = 27%

Average herd: 65.4 goats; 17.5 sheep; 14.1 cattle = 30.9 LSU

10 farmers own 50-100 LSU (717 LSU)

3 farmers own 100-200 LSU (359 LSU)

3 farmers own 200+ LSU (639 LSU)

6 farmers own 26% of total livestock

16 farmers own 45% of total

107 farmers own less than 50 LSU with average herds of 19.5 LSU

### **Fransfontein**

368 farmers

103 females = 28%

Average herd: 71 goats; 8.8 sheep; 15 cattle = 31 LSU

46 farmers own 50-100 LSU (3171 LSU)

15 farmers own 100+ LSU (2174 LSU)

61 farmers own 46% of total livestock

307 farmers own less than 50 LSU with average herds of 19.8 LSU

### **Grootberg - Anker**

449 farmers

116 females = 26%

Average herd: 65.5 goats; 16.9 sheep; 26 cattle = **42 LSU**

63 farmers own 50-100 LSU (4371 LSU)

36 farmers own 100-200 LSU (4858 LSU)

5 farmers own 200-300 LSU (1147 LSU)

4 farmers own 300+ (1829 LSU)

45 farmers own 41% of total livestock

108 farmers own 64 % of total

341 farmers own less than 50 LSU with average herds of **19.5 LSU**

### **Bergsig**

63 farmers

15 females =24%

Average herd: 68.5 goats; 31.2 sheep; 10.8 cattle: **30.7 LSU**

6 farmers own 50-100 LSU (463)

4 farmers own 100-200 LSU (434)

2 farmers own 200+ (441)

6 farmers own 45% of total livestock

12 farmers own 69% of total

51 farmers own less than 50 LSU with average herds of **11.7 LSU**

### **Summary**

2,223 farmers own 57,221 LSU

683 female farmers = 31%

84 farmers (4%) **own** >100 LSUs (14,237 LSUs) or **23% of total herd.**

260 farmers (12%) **own** >50 LSU (26,154 LSUs) or **42% of total.**

1,963 farmers (88%) **own** < 50 LSUs (35219 LSUs) or **58% of total.**

### APPENDIX 3

#### MATCHED GROUND PHOTO FIELD SURVEY DATA

**Site #:** 10

**Date:** 27/4/95

**Grid Reference:** 2115CC

**Co-ordinates:** 21° 53' 50"S; 15° 15' 40"E

**Match of:** "Mountains on the Border of the Namib Desert";  
Blue Book (Union of South Africa 1931).

**Region:** Erongo

**District:** Karibib

**Location:** Black Range Farm # 72; 3 km SSE of Swartklip Post

**Location map:**

**Veld type:** Semi-desert Savanna transition (Giess 1971);  
Nama Karoo (Irish 1994).

**Subject:** Plains with minor water courses looking towards Spitzkoppe.

**Geology and Soils:** Calcrete/Schist/quartz intrusions. Gravel or sandy surface, gentle hill elevations intersected by shallow, broad water courses - tributaries of Sandamap river.

**Landscape Description:** Savanna Plains. Photo site near top of water shed giving panoramic views of Spitzkoppe and Erongo Mountains. Vegetation dominated by *Acacia reficiens* and occasional *Boscia foetida*; tree and shrub cover sparse outside of water channels. Good annual grass cover.

**Description of Major Changes:** Bare foreground in earlier photo now with dense grass cover; considerable thickening of tree and shrub cover in drainage channels throughout all regions. Little die-back evident.

Site #: 10

## PHOTOGRAPHIC DATA

[Camera elevation from ground: 3 metres]

Camera	Film	Frame	Lens	Exp.	<i>f</i> stop	Aspect	Time
Pentax MX	FP4 (125)	film #4 25	80mm	60	16	320°	6:50 am
		26			22		
		27			11		
		28	70mm		16		6:52
		29			22		
		30			11		
		31	50mm		22		
		32			32		
		33			16		
		34	28m		22+		
		35			32		
		36			22		
polarized		# 5; 0	70mm		8+	350°	7:00
		1			8	290°	
		2			11	350°	
		3			16	320°	
		4			22	320°	
		5			11	290°	
		6	28mm		16	320°	7:05
		7			22		
		8			11		
Om 10	Fuji Slide	23		125	22		7:10
		24		60	22		
		25	70mm	125	16		
		26	35mm	125	22		
Oly mu [auto]	colour 125	1	35mm			320°	
		2				350°	
		3				290°	
		4				320°	



## DETAILED VEGETATION SURVEY

#	Working Name	Species Name	Region: % cover <sup>3</sup>			
			A	B	C	D
1		Stipagrostis uniplumis	25	25	25	25
2		S. ciliata	4	4	4	
3		S. obtusa	1	-	-	
4		Fingeruthia africana	3	-	-	
5		Schmidtia kalaharensis	r			
6		Eragrostis nindensis	<1			
7		Acacia reficiens	7	7	8	10
8		Boscia foetida	<1	<1	<1	<1
9		Aristida adscensionis	r			
10		Eragrostis trichophora	<1			
11		Triraphis purpurea	r			
12		Enneapogon sp.	r			
13		Leucosphaera bainesii	r			
14		Stipagrostis hirtigluma	3	4	3	
15	sm. herb; grey/green # 1	Petalidium lanatum	r			
16	bushy herb #2	Monechma genistifoliam	r			
17	ephemeral #3	Hirpicium gortcroides	<1			
18	yellow flower #4	Geigaria sp.	<1			
19	succulent #5	Zygophyllum cf. odorata	<1			
20	tree, 1.5m spread #6	Commiphora nandensis	r			
21	annual, purple tinge, fruit #7	Chamaesyce glanduligera	r			
22		Maerua parvifolia	r	r		

**Notes on Individuals & Regions:**Region A

Camera position within 20m of original, and higher in order to show growth. otherwise view would be obscured at original camera position. From exact camera position the individuals can be identified as follows:

#1: A. reficiens now partly senescent; five stems branching at base, each about 10-12 cm dia. Tree height 2.75m; spread 4-5 m. See colour snap for detail. Minimum age must be at least 75 years old and must represent one of oldest specimens.

#2: A. reficiens.

#3: Boscia foetida

#4: A. reficiens; coppiced in recent past, now re-grown.

#5: B. foetida?

<sup>3</sup> Regions defined on working photo as A= foreground up to 50m; B = area divided from A by first drainage channel to right; C = area divided from B by second drainage channel to right; D= area divided from A by first drainage channel to left.

### Notes on Individuals & Regions [cont.]:

Regions B & C: Generally thickened up with *A. reficiens* in shallow drainage channels - density estimated to have triple. Good recruitment - 10% under 3 metres high. Disused track running across these regions show recruitment of *A. reficiens* caused by disturbance.

Region D: As for B & C with perhaps only double thickening overall. Larger water courses in this region support *A. erioloba*; *A. tortilis* although these show some recent die-back.

Overall: Few signs of recent grazing pressure. Nearest farm post is now abandoned - Water Affairs are now repairing bore-hole wind-pump. *A. reficiens* recruitment and survival is favoured by the climatic shift during the last 65 years. A rapid survey of size/age classes of *Acacia reficiens* shows even recruitment pattern:

Height in metres	%
<.5	25
.5 - 1	17
1 - 2	27
2 - 3	24
+3	7
	100

APPENDIX 4

MATCHED GROUND PHOTO SITES

Key:

Source of Original

- NNA = Nambibna National Archives
- BB = Blue Book [see Union of South Africa]
- SWAF = South West Africa Farmer
- Süchting = Paul W. Süchting, Nat. Art Gallery
- Eriksson = Axel Eriksson, Nat. Art Gallery

Veg. Type

- I = Semi-desert Savanna/Grassland
- II = Semi-desert Transition to Thornveld
- III = Mixed/Mopane Acacia Woodland
- S = Savanna Biome
- NK = Nama Karoo Biome
- D = Desert Biome

Geo-physical Type

- 0 = Flat plains with little run-off
- 1 = Plains subject to run-off from large adjacent feature
- 2 = Riverine
- 3 = Rocky substrate

Land-use Type

- a = Undisturbed Control
- b = Heavily Disturbed/ within 1km radius of settlement or bore-hole
- c = Subject to moderate/intermittent grazing pressure

Matched Photo #	Photo Site #	Name	Co-ordinates	Source of Original	Date of Original	Date of match	Veg. type	Land-use type	Geo-physical type	Woody Veg. Change
1	1	Spitzkoppe Sandamap R.	21°50'48" S 15°14'04" E	NNA 1697	c. 1955	7/2/94 3/3/96	II [NK]	c	0/2	+
2	2	Spitzkoppe Klien Spitz.	21°50'50" 15°03'38"	NNA 3710	1949	2/7/94 5/3/96	I [NK]	c	0	+
3	3	Brandberg Lower Numas	21°06'48" 14°23'39"	NNA 3131	1955	3/7/94 26/5/95	II [NK]	a	0/1	-
4	4	Ojihaenama-perero	21°02'18" 16°23'41"	NNA 1485	c. 1907- 1914	4/7/94 26/3/96	IV [S]	a	0/1	+

Matched Photo #	Photo Site #	Name	Co-ordinates	Source of Original	Date of Original	Date of match	Veg. type	Land-use type	Geo-physical type	Woody Veg. Change
5	5	Spitzkoppe Village	21°51'12" 15°12'30"	NNA 3487	c.1955	5/3/95	II [NK]	b	2/0	-
6	6	Spitzkoppe German post	21°49'15" 14°12'48"	NNA 2408	1896	3/3/95	II [S]	b	1	+
7	7	Spitzkoppe Dam	21°49'45" 14°12'55"	SWAF 15/6/1927	c. 1927	5/3/95	II [S]	c	1	+
8	8	Okamire Matemba Dam	20°51'00" 15°27'30"	BB 1938	c. 1937	16/3/95 23/5/95	III [S]	b	0	+
9	9	Spitzkoppe Nelrus Sandamap R.	21°50' 15°14'	BB 1939	c.1938	22/3/95	II [NK]	c	0/2	+
10	10	Black Range Spitzkoppe	21°53'50" 15°15'40"	BB 1931	c.1930	27/4/95	II [NK]	c	0	+
11	11	Fransfontein	20°12'26" 15°01'10"	NNA 10770	c.1914	2/5/95 19/3/96	III [S]	b	0/1	+
12	12	Sesfontein Village	19°07'30" 13°36'45"	VW 1951	c.1949	3/5/95	III [NK]	b	0	0
13	13	Sesfontein North	19°06'10" 13°37'08"	NNA 2876	1951	3/5/95	III [NK]	b	0	+
14	14	Sesfontein Fort	19°06'10" 13°37'08"	NNA 4047	1960	4/5/95	III [NK]	b	0	+
15	15	Sesfontein East Plains	19°06'53" 14°40'35"	NNA 2902	1951	5/5/95	III [NK]	c	0	0
16, 17, 47	16	Brandberg Upper Numas	21°06' 14°23'	NNA 3074, 3075, 3046	1955	26/5/95	II [NK]	a	0/1	0 (-)

Matched Photo #	Photo Site #	Name	Co-ordinates	Source of Original	Date of Original	Date of match	Veg. type	Land-use type	Geo-physical type	Woody Veg. Change
18	17	Brandberg Plains Numas & Naib	21°5'00" 14°28'16"	NNA 3162	9/1965	26/5/95	I [D]	a	0	0(+)
19	18	Brandberg Naib Schl.	21°04'44" 14°26'45"	NNA 3163	9/1965	25/5/95	I [NK]	a	0/1	+
23,24,25	19	Karibib Town & west Plains	21°56'30" 15°52'07"	NNA 500 501 & 4934	c. 1907	22/10/1995	II [S]	b	0	+
26	20	Spitzkoppe/Sandamap	21°50'40" 15°13'20"	Süchting (painting)	1/7/39	24/10/1995	II [NK]	c	0/2	+
27	21	Black Range 10 km south of Spitzkoppe	21°54'50" 15°12'10"	Eriksson (painting)	c. 1915	23/10/1995	II [NK]	a	0	+
28	N/A	Sandamap Mine	21°54'00" 15°21'30"	NNA 2136	?	23/10/1995	II [S]	b	0	+/-
29	22	Usakos southern hills	22°01'39" 15°35'05"	NNA 10544	1955?	22/11/1995	II [S]	a	3	0 (+/-)
32	23	Usakos/Unguati	21°59'03" 15°37'25"	NNA 5340	c.1900-1914	21/11/1995	II [NK]	b/(c)	3	+
33	24	Brandberg UgabRiver: Gomatsareb	21°00'25" 14°36'30"	NNA 10071	1953	7/11/95	II [NK]	c	2	+
34	25	Brandberg Plains; Zisab	21°05' 14°45'	NNA 10067	1953	7/11/95	II [NK]	a	0	+
35	26	Farm Ongava	21°57' 16°03'	NNA 8331	c.1914	11/2/95	II [S]	c	0	+



Matched Photo #	Photo Site #	Name	Co-ordinates	Source of Original	Date of Original	Date of match	Veg. type	Land-use type	Geo-physical type	Woody Veg. Change
36	27	Amieb, Philips Cave	21°48'00" 15°38'45"	NNA4110	1962	20/11/1995	II [S]	c	0/1	-
37	28	Otjimbingwe	22°21'00" 16°07'20"	NNA 9423	c. 1904-1914	21/11/1995	II [NK]	b	0/2	+
38	29	"	22°21'20" 16°07'18"	NNA 2139	1950	21/11/1995	II [NK]	b	0	-
39	30	"	22°21'30" 16°07'25"	NNA 2655 & 2656	1876	21/11/1995	II [NK]	b	0/2	+
40	31	"	22°21'25" 16°07'45"	NNA 1904	c. 1915	21/11/1995	II [NK]	b	0/2	+
41	32	"	22°21'25" 16°07'15"	NNA 8617	c. 1910	21/11/1995	II [NK]	b	0/2	+
42	33	Uidraai	22°21'50" 16°12'20"	NNA 2661, 2662, 2663	1876	21/11/1995	II [S]	c	0/2	+
43	34	Otjimbingwe Swakop R.	22°21'55" 16°07'18"	NNA 2657, 2658	1876	23/11/1995	II [NK]	b	2/0	+
44	35	Otjimbingwe Omusema R.	22°21'20" 16°07'55"	NNA 5163	c. 1905	23/11/1995	II [NK]	b	2/0	+
45	36	Okombahe Omaruru R.	21°21'30" 15°23'50"	NNA 3264	c. 1950 - 1955	13/2/96	II [S]	b	2	+
46	N/A	Okombahe R.C.Church	21°21'30" 15°23'55"	NNA 4595	1960	16/2/96	II [S]	b	0	(+/-)
48	37	Brandberg, east of Naib	21°04'18" 14°25'55"	NNA 3164	4/1967	10/3/96	II [NK]	a	0/1	0

Matched Photo #	Photo Site #	Name	Co-ordinates	Source of Original	Date of Original	Date of match	Veg. type	Land-use type	Geo-physical type	Woody Veg. Change
49	38	Brandberg: West Plains	21°10'25" 14°22'05"	NNA 10066	1953	10/3/96	I [D]	a	0	-
50	10	Black Range	21°53'50" 15°15'40"	Eriksson (painting)	c.1914	27/4/95	II [NK]	c	0	+

## APPENDIX 5

### MATCHED AERIAL PHOTO SITES

Office of the Surveyor - General  
Department of Justice, Windhoek

#### Uitdraai:

Job # 294  
Date: 1958  
Photo # 2226 & 2281  
Scale: 1:36,000

Job # 830  
Date: 1979  
Photo # 223  
Scale: 1:50,000  
Enlargement: 1.48

#### Otjimbingwe:

Job # 294  
Date: 1958  
Photo # 2223  
Scale: 1:36,000

Job # 830  
Date: 1979  
Photo # 356  
Scale: 1:50,000  
Enlargement: 1.48

#### Okombahe:

Job # 501  
Date: 1961  
Photo # 12,573; 12,574; 12,575  
Scale: 1:36,000

Job # 855  
Date: 1981  
Photo # 613; 614  
Scale: 1:50,000  
Enlargement: 1.52

#### Spitzkoppe:

Job # 294  
Date: 1958  
Photo # 0762; 4707  
Scale: 1:36,000

Job # 855  
Date: 1981  
Photo # 410  
Scale: 1:50,000  
Enlargement: 1.44

#### Black Range:

Job # 294  
Date: 1958  
Photo # 0842; 0764  
Scale: 1:36,000

Job # 855  
Date: 1981  
Photo # 361  
Scale: 1:50,000  
Enlargement: 1.44

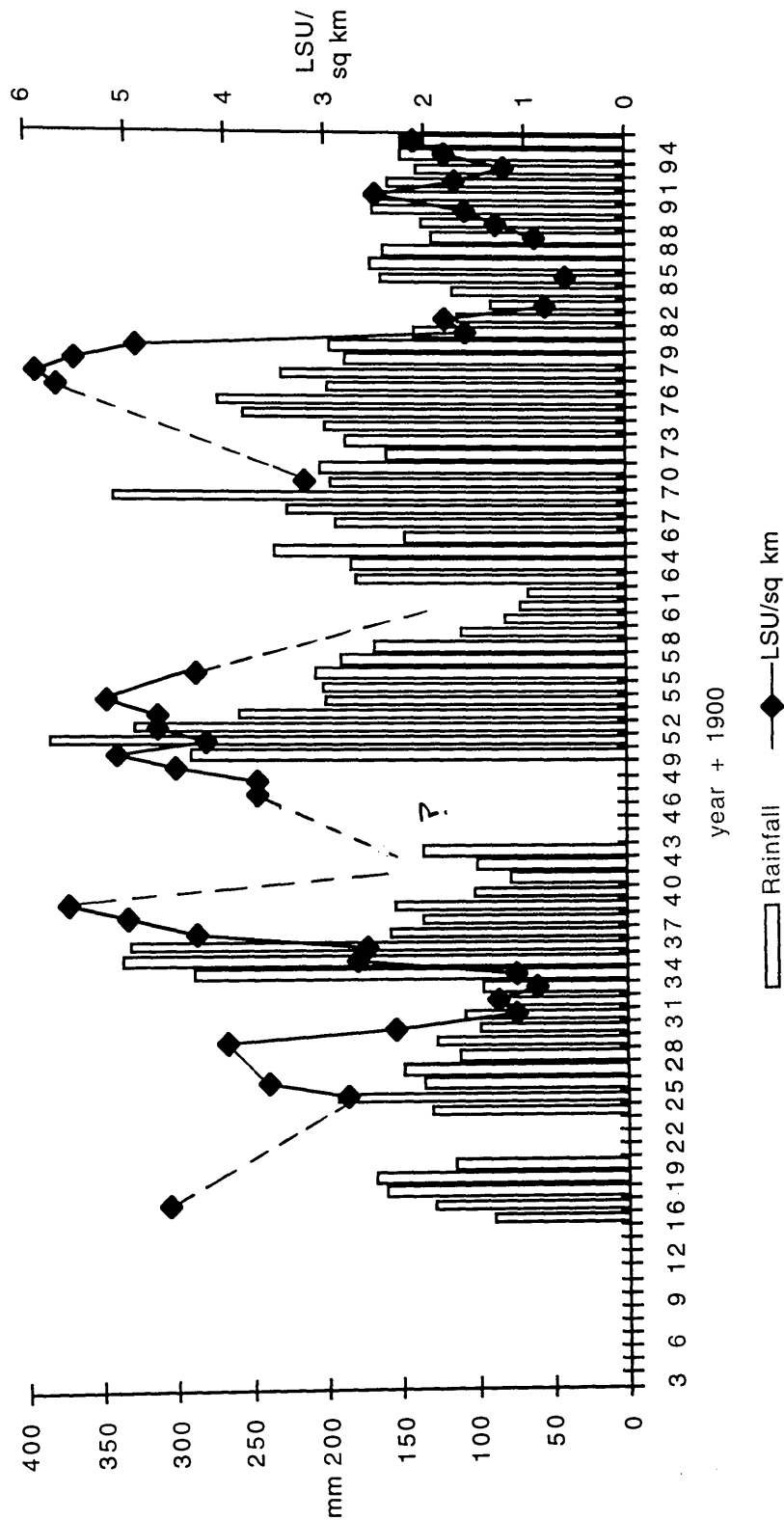
#### Sesfontein:

Job # 45/43  
Date: 1943  
Photo # 1510; 1512  
Scale: 1:25,000

Job # 745  
Date: 1975  
Photo # 5617  
Scale: 1:50,000  
Enlargement: 1.72

# APPENDIX 6 RAINFALL AND STOCKING DENSITY - OKOMBAHE RESERVE

Rainfall (3 year running mean) and stocking density (LSUs per square kilometre) for Okombahe Reserve. Data derived from Blue Books (1925 - 1940) ; Kohler (1959); Gordon (1972); Veterinary Services Livestock census, 1980 - 1992; Agricultural Extension 1993 - 1995.



## APPENDIX 7

### LIVESTOCK POPULATION, DAMARALAND 1977 - 1993<sup>4</sup>

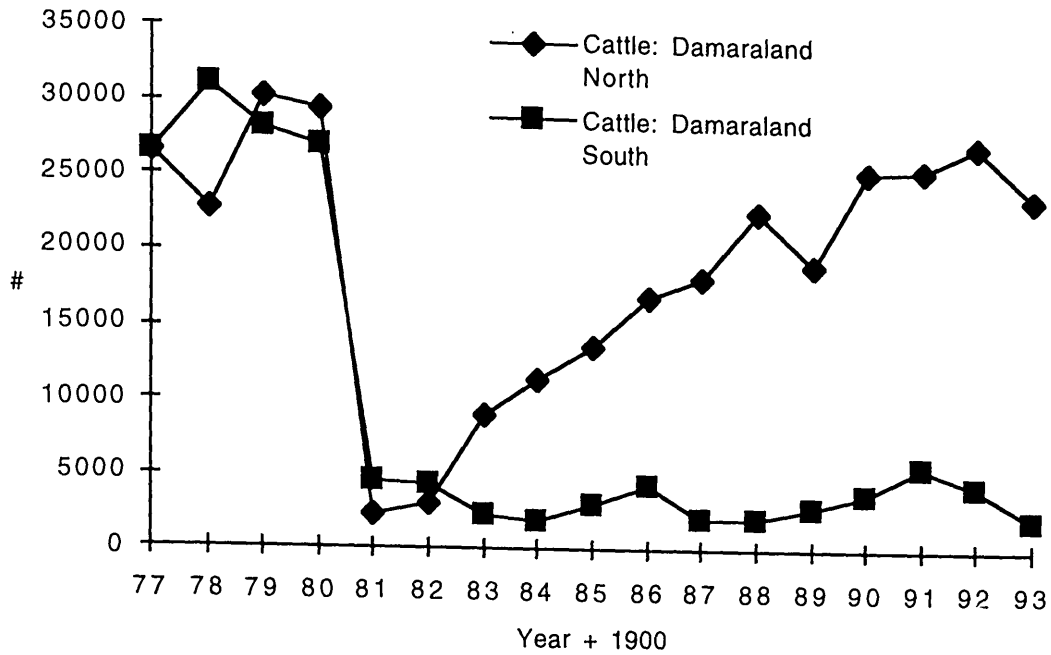


Fig. A7.1: Cattle population in North and South Damaraland, 1977 to 1993.

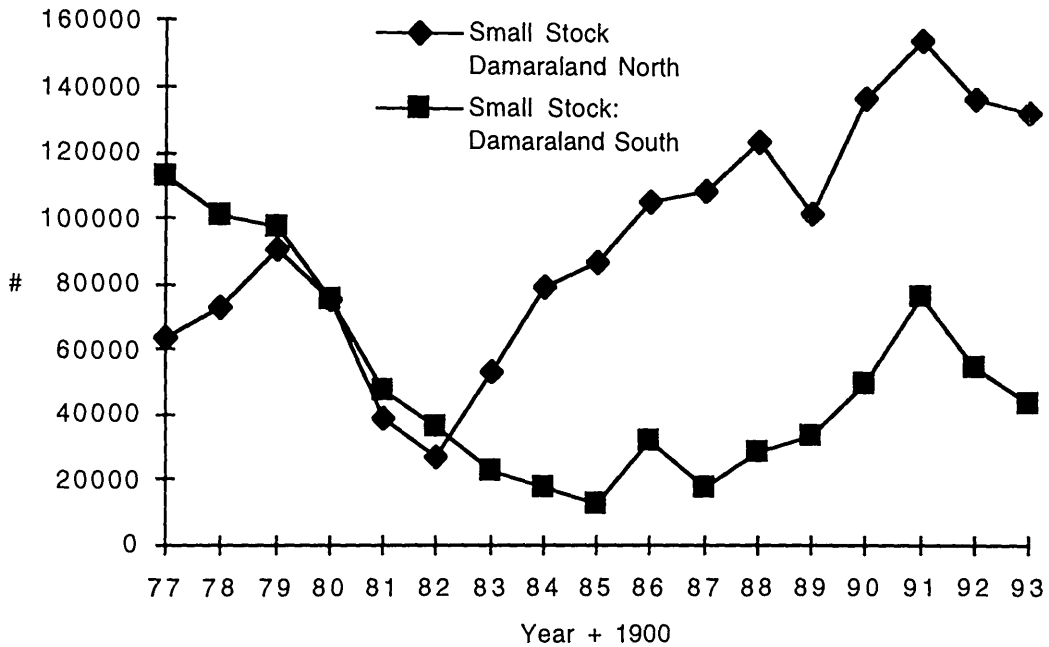


Fig. A7.2: Small stock population in North and South Damaraland, 1977 - 1993.

<sup>4</sup>Derived from National Veterinary Services Livestock Census Reports for North and South Damaraland (not including Otjohorongo Reserve) and adjusted for mistakes in original publication.



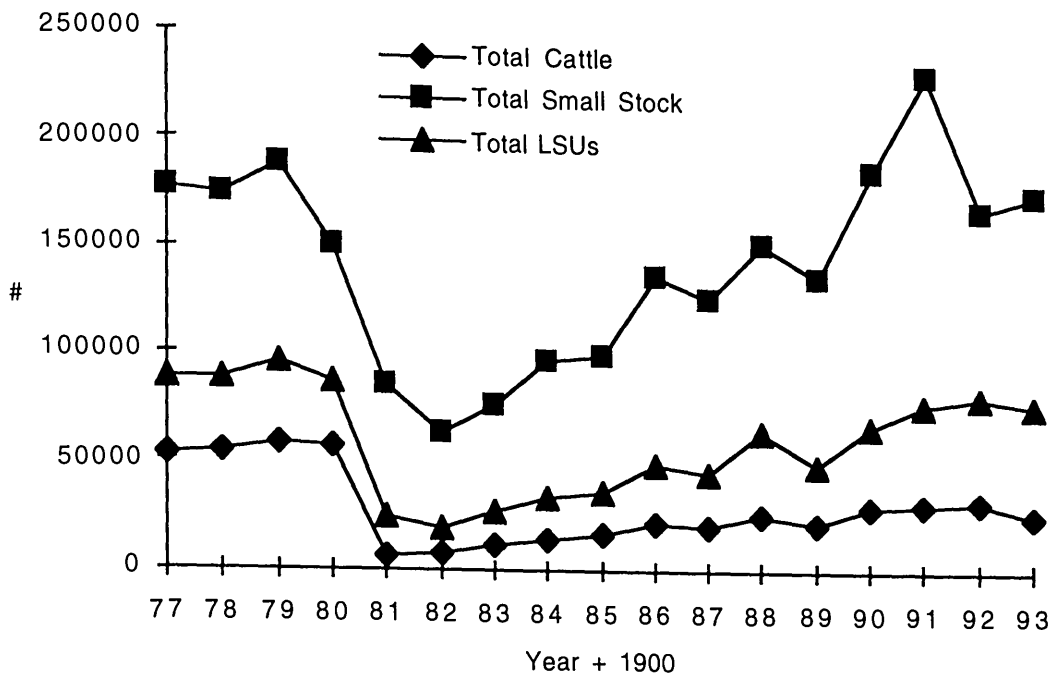


Fig. A7.3: Total livestock population in Damaraland 1977 - 1993.

Three trends in livestock population change occurred as a result of the 1980-82 drought:

- 1) A steep decline of livestock numbers occurred at the beginning of the drought and total LSUs recovered to pre-drought levels within ten years of the onset of drought;
- 2) Regional differences in the rates of recovery reflect a general movement of farmers to higher rainfall areas in the north during the 1980s - LSUs in Southern Damaraland never recovered to pre-drought levels, partly because farmers moved north and partly because the drought was more severe and lasted longer in the South.
- 3) Recovery of total LSUs was achieved by farmers relying more on small stock than on cattle. Not only do small stock reproduce more rapidly than cattle, but they also withstand drought conditions better.

## APPENDIX 8

### LIVESTOCK AND FARMER POPULATION STATISTICS OF INDIVIDUAL FARMS IN SPITZKOPPE WARD, 1988 - 1995

(Nelrus, Sandamap Suid, Spitzkoppe & Black Range)

#### Farm Records: Nelrus

Individuals and Dates of Residence (average length of residence 2.4 years):

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Henog // Ariseb	x							
Maria Lucia Gawaseb	x	x		x				
Thalia & Leonard Eibeb		x			x	x		
Ishmaiel Naobeb		x		x				
Hegwig & Heroldt Gariseb				x	x	x		

[Nelrus abandoned in 1994 due to water problems.  
Water Affairs repair wind pump in May 1995.]

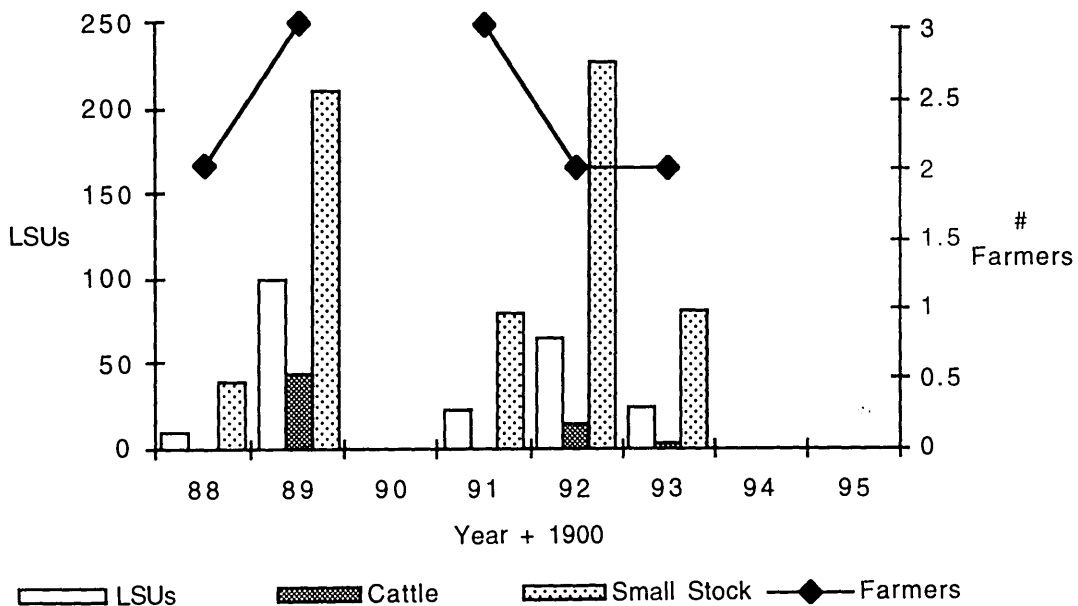


Fig A8.1 Population of livestock and herd owners: Nelrus, 1988 - 1995.

## Farm Records: Sandamap Suid

Individual Farmers and Dates of Residence (average length of residence: 2.3 years):

	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95
Gideon Hoebeb	x							
Mina Naobes	x	x						
Julia Keinus	x	x		x				x
Laban Uirab	x	x		x	x	x		
Wilson Anieb	x	x		x	x			
Maria Nuweses	x	x		x		x	x	
Gideon Magundu	x							
Hillaria Bly	x	x		x		x	x	x
Fredricka Boois	x	x		x				
Anna Swartz (inclu Paul Swartz)	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
Daniel Naobeb		x			x	x	x	
Willem Doeseb		x		x				
Johannes Rooi		x		x	x	x	x	x
Amilia Classen		x						
Behj. Uirab		x						
Gissella Pieters		x						
Ishmael Tsuseb				x	x	x	x	x
David Althore				x				
Mina Sabahs (Naubas)				x		x	x	x
Veronica Naweses				x		x		
E. Eichas				x				
Eliazer & Martin Karon				x	x	x	x	
Joseph Joas				x				
Titus Neumbo				x				
Elphride /Gases				x			x	
Veronica Geingob					x			
Stanley Brocherhoff					x			x
Sigrfied Brocherhoff								x
Pricilla Brocherhoff								x
Gerson Naweseb					x		x	x
Jacobine Swartbooi						x		
Simon Uirab						x		
Anton Gandi						x	x	
Elphride Ugases						x		
Veronica Masida						x	x	
Amilia Shamba						x		
Wilson Aniheb							x	
Jephta Brown							x	

Sandamap Farm (continued)

Livestock of Individual Farmers (LSUs<sup>5</sup> excluding donkeys and horses):

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Jacobus Ivanson								x
Adolf Gawaseb								x
Laban, Ther. Wils. Uirab	14	15		9	8	6	-	-
Maria Nuweses	0	48		87	-	21	82	-
Hillaria Bly	42	56		70	-	30	26	39
Anna & Paul Swartz	12	26		33	-	19	4	26
Johannes Rooi	-	4		6	7	7	8	28
Ishmael Tsuseb				52	45	29	32	-
Eliazer & Martin Karon				22*a	5*b	10*c	10	-

\*a = cattle only  
\*b = small stock only  
\*c = cattle and small stock

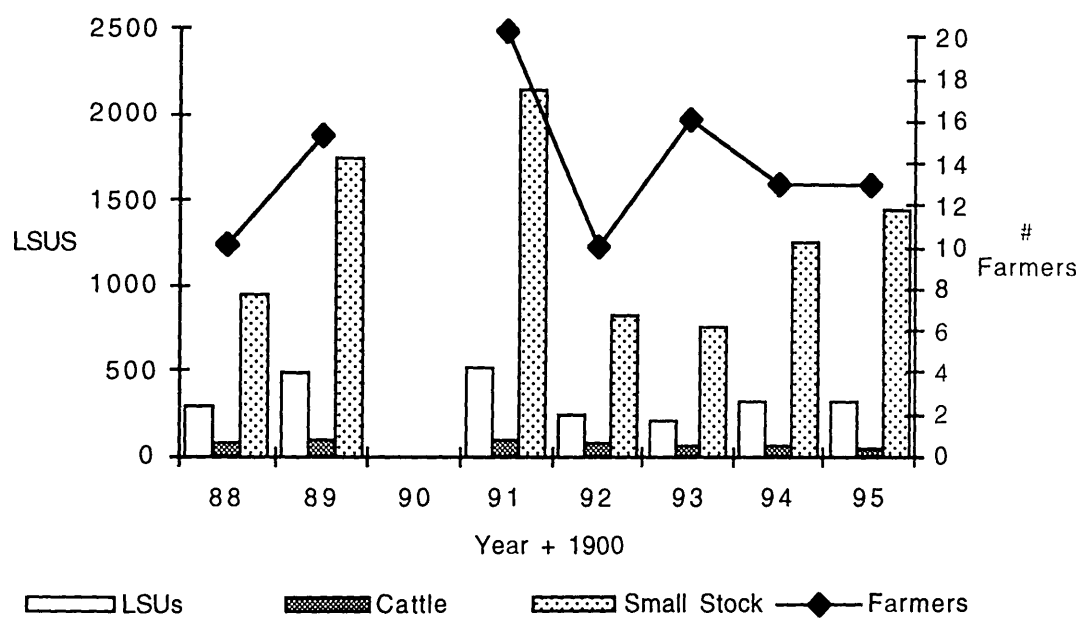


Fig A8.2: Population of livestock and herd owners: Sandamap Suid, 1988 - 1995.

<sup>5</sup> LSUs = 1 cow/bull = 1; 1 calf = 0.5; 1 small stock = 0.2; 1 kid/lamb = 0.1;

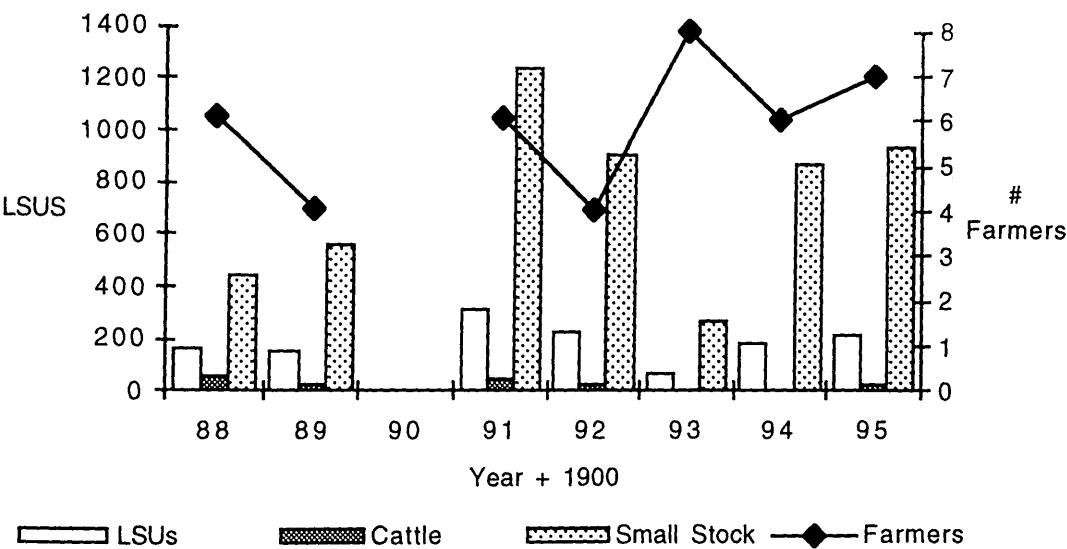
# Farm Records: Spitzkoppe

Individual and Dates of Residence (average length of residence: 2.6 years):

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Albert Tsuseb		x	x		x	x	x	x
Hermann Uri-Khob		x	x					
Joshua Hoebeb	x			x		x	x	x
Willem Doeseb	x							
Ursulla Goagases	x	x		x	x	x		x
Cornelius Gaseb	x							
Samuel Thaniseb		x		x	x	x	x	x
Gideon Hoeseb				x				
x Kaneb				x				
Rheinhardt Doeseb						x	x	
Isabella Keis						x		
Elizabeth Eixas							x	
Elizabeth Xoagus							x	x
Benjamin Naruseb							x	
David Gariseb							x	x

Livestock of Individual Farmers ((LSUs excluding donkeys and horses))

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Albert Tsuseb		20	30		57	29	-	25
Herman Uri-Khob	57	48		-	70	28	44	81
Ursulla Goagoses	43	57		106	79	23	43	52
Samuel Thanises		6		12	12	3	-	-



**Fig A8.3: Population of livestock and herd owners: Spitzkoppe Farm 1988 - 1995.**



# Farm Records: Black Range

Individual Farmers and Dates of Residence (average length of residence: 3.1 years):

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Daniel Dauseb	x			x		x		
Ishmael Gawanab	x	x		x		x		
Adolf Ida	x	x			x		x	x
Amalia Classens	x			x	x	x	x	x
Magdalena (& A) Hones	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
Suzanna Classens	x							
Simon Classen	x							
Joseph Uirab		x						
Alberth Gariseb	x			x		x		
Rebecca Christain		x		x		x		x
Anna Geingos				x				
Pinneas Ouseb						x	x	x
Niklaas Dausab						x	x	x
D. Nongombe							x	x
Walter Honeb								x

Livestock of Individual Farmers ((LSUs excluding donkeys and horses))

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Ishmael Gawaseb	8	5		9	7	8	10	23
Amalia Classens	57			25	2	10	8	6
Magdalena Hones	44	39		87	60	28	37	-
Rebecca Christian		7		14	10	8	-	-
Daniel Dausab	21					9	-	-

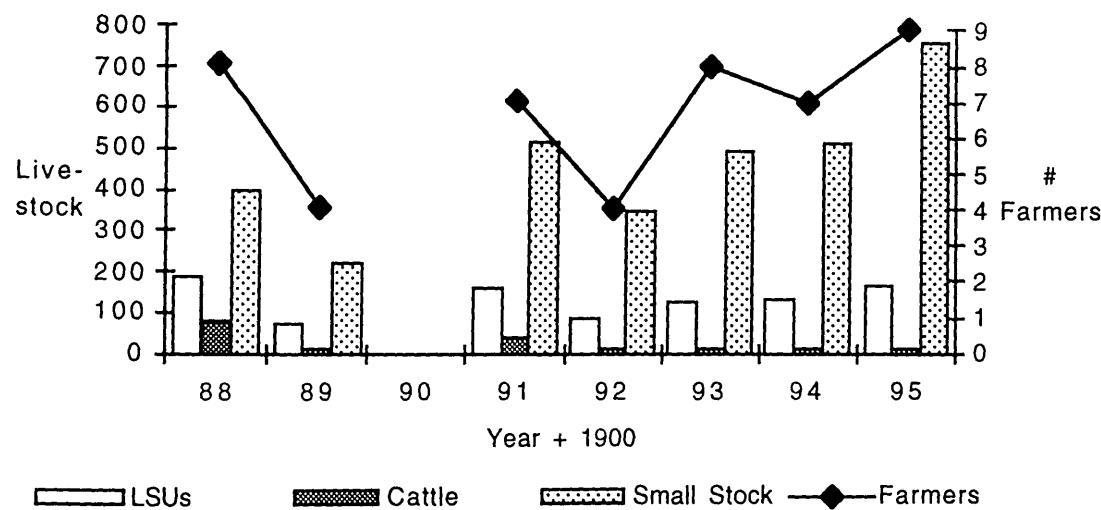


Fig A8.4 : Population of livestock and herd owners: Black Range Farm 1988 - 1995.